

Singapore's Labor Relations Reveal that People's Action Party Pragmatism is  
Political (1958-1985)

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## Introduction

Over 1000 years ago, this was a mud-flat, swamp. Today, this is a modern city.

Ten years from now, this will be a metropolis. Never fear.<sup>1</sup>

- Lee Kuan Yew, September 12, 1965 -

Despite Singapore's recent ejection from the Malaysian Federation in 1965, Prime Minister of Singapore and Leader of the People's Action Party (PAP) Mr. Lee Kuan Yew delivered this now iconic line to reassure Singaporeans that their future was bright. The self-confidence projected through this quote reflects the forward-facing ideology of the PAP that would, in time, effectively solve the many problems facing Singapore. Situated at the end of the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia, Singapore was an entrepot port for ships traveling between East Asia and Europe before the PAP came to power in 1959. In addition to Indian and Malay people, the city-state's citizens were predominantly Chinese in a Malay-speaking region. Most were impoverished. The PAP resolved to supercharge Singapore's economic growth via carefully planned free-market economic development directed by a strong centralized state. Although many PAP policies were ad hoc, over time, these policies morphed into the Singapore Model of Economic Development. On the surface, Singapore's success appears an enigma of fundamentally opposite economic models combining together elements from across the political economy spectrum to best suit Singapore's particular needs. However, Singapore's success can best be understood in the context of globalization and neoliberal ideology. Despite not following conventional models of economic development prescribed by global financial institutions and neoliberal economists, Singapore's authoritarian model succeeded in an increasingly globalized world. Today, Singapore is one of the most highly developed nations in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, "Speech at the Sree Narayana Mission," (Singapore, September 12, 1965)  
<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19650912a.pdf>.

Due to the seemingly paradoxical mixture of authoritarian planning and free-market economics in the Singapore Model, many scholars and politicians seek to understand it. Although difficult, these people hope that by gaining insight into the Singapore Model they may replicate its success in other developing nations. Despite Singapore's success, however, blindly following steps outlined by the PAP is irresponsible. The existence of an authoritarian government willing to use violence is a prerequisite for the Singapore Model. In this model, unquestioned control of a ruling elite is crucial, and citizens are expected to make countless sacrifices to promote the National Interest. The research outlined in this paper focuses on how the gradual implementation of the Singapore Model of Economic Development relating to labor slowly expanded the control of the PAP over the city-state's economy and society from 1958 to 1985. This approach highlights the problems and drawbacks of the Singapore Model to educate readers what this model entails.

### ***Research Questions***

This paper answers one fundamental question: How do labor relations fit into the PAP's ideology of pragmatism? To answer this question, this paper will define the concepts of hegemony, the Singapore Model of Economic Development, and Tripartism. Furthermore, this paper will outline the role of labor in the Singapore Model in the PAP's hegemony, how the PAP gained and then held onto power in Singapore, the evolution of Singapore's labor relations, and the PAP's handling of tripartite relations. By exploring these concepts, this paper provides a detailed chronology of how the PAP expanded its hegemonic ideology of pragmatism through an analysis of Singapore's labor relations.

*Thesis*

This paper furthers the analysis put forth by Kenneth Paul Tan in the article, “The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore.” Tan argues that the PAP’s claim to be apolitical and pragmatic is, in fact, political. In the article, Tan focuses on the evolving claims to legitimacy made by the PAP, from the PAP’s ascension to power, to when the article was written in 2012.<sup>2</sup> Tan posits that pragmatism is not a rational, apolitical action because deciding what is pragmatic reflects a set of values. To the PAP, being pragmatic means furthering economic growth in Singapore and continuing the PAP’s rule:

While economic growth appears to be the overriding goal of pragmatism, it is also a goal that is intimately associated with – and, in some instances, even subordinate to – a more fundamental and much less publicly-expressed goal of the PAP government, which is to maintain the one-party dominant state with the PAP solidly in power.<sup>3</sup>

Tan posits that by understanding these two standards by which things are deemed pragmatic, one understands the politics and political decisions of the PAP.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, PAP pragmatism fits neatly into the broader political trend of neoliberal ideology spreading across the globe.<sup>5</sup> Tan points out that despite claims of acting non-ideologically under a unique system of pragmatic policy, the PAP’s pragmatism in its historic and contemporary form is “capitalism by an ideologically sanitized name.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Paul Tan, “The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-Liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, no. 1 (2012): 69.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 68 and 70.

<sup>6</sup> Tan, “The Ideology of Pragmatism,” 84.

This paper furthers Tan's argument that PAP pragmatism is political by analyzing labor relations in Singapore. The history of Singapore's labor relations from 1958 to 1985 reveals that the Singapore Model of Economic Development is the politics of PAP pragmatism manifest as each of its actions promotes economic growth, the continued rule of the party, or both. Specifically, this paper explores Tan's argument through the chronological history of Singapore's labor relations using primary and secondary sources in conjunction with original analyses. Furthermore, by detailing the history of labor relations throughout Singapore's modern history, this paper will show the authoritarian drawbacks of such a system to inform readers about what the Singapore Model entails beyond the glowing macroeconomic vision presented by the ruling People's Action Party.

### *Historiography*

The enigma of Singapore's economic success has attracted the attention of much scholarship, including the research in this paper. This project began as an investigation of how Singapore's land policies evolved. Since then, it has morphed into an investigation of how the PAP expanded its ideology of pragmatism in Singapore by focusing on the evolution of the city-state's labor relations. This paper draws upon a wide variety of secondary sources. As one might expect for an authoritarian society like Singapore, almost all research material available is biased by association with the PAP. There are only a few occasions throughout the research presented in this paper where source material does not have a PAP origin. These are primary source documents from the British Foreign Office, interviews of Singaporeans by scholars, and histories of Singapore from before the PAP took power. Obtaining these sources means accessing archives with material free of PAP influence, such as declassified documents from the British

Government. No matter how critical of the PAP, modern Singapore research, including the research in this paper, mainly works with PAP-approved sources. As such, each of these scholars, and the field of Singapore research generally, is biased by the PAP-associated research material available. Many scholars work with the massive amount of economic data put out by the PAP. Additionally, scholars and the research in this paper analyze speeches from the PAP's political leadership, policy documents, articles put out by newspapers allowed to exist by the PAP, and the proceedings of seminars hosted by PAP-affiliated organizations. These documents are much easier to obtain, as the PAP actively promotes the circulation of these data by publishing books containing these primary sources.

Regarding secondary source material, while many great analyses of Singapore come from outside of the city-state, surprisingly, there are also many critical analyses of the PAP that originate from Singapore. Key scholars from outside of Singapore include W.G. Huff, a scholar who, during the 1990s, focused on the macroeconomics of Singapore; Michael Barr, a modern scholar who focused on Singapore's labor relations; Hans U. Luther, a scholar who, during the 1970s, focused on labor relations in Asia; Peter Sheldon, a modern business historian; and Gareth Curless, a modern historian who focused on Asian labor relations. Conversely, there are also many scholars who wrote from within Singapore, such as Belinda Yuen, a curator for much infrastructure scholarship; Anne Halia, a scholar focused on urban land rent; and Kenneth Paul Tan, the scholar whose ideas this paper furthers. While Tan is the most influential voice of Singapore scholarship in this paper, each of the other authors listed above has massively influenced this paper by shaping individual sub-arguments in support of Tan's larger ideas.

### ***Roadmap***

After providing detailed context, this paper chronologically details how the PAP spread its hegemonic ideology of pragmatism in Singapore's society to promote economic development. The time period covered by this paper begins with the ascension of the PAP to power in 1958, and it ends in 1985, around the time when immigrant guest laborers began to contribute significant numbers to Singapore's workforce, radically changing its composition.<sup>7</sup> To begin, in Chapter One, this paper details hegemony as described by Antonio Gramsci, PAP pragmatism, and the Singapore Model of Economic Development. Then, Chapter Two describes the period of decolonization in Singapore from 1958 to 1965, when the PAP initially secured its hold on power by suppressing both political and economic opposition. Next, Chapter Three details how the PAP began to shift from labor suppression to working with labor in a new mode of economic production organization called Tripartism. Finally, Chapter Four outlines how the PAP convinced both labor and big business to follow its lead, resulting in an extreme degree of PAP influence over Singapore's economy and society.

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<sup>7</sup> Stephan Dobbs and Kah Send Loh, "Open or Bordered? Singapore, Industrilisation and Malaysian Workers," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 2 (2019): 210.

## **Chapter One: Hegemony, PAP Pragmatism, and the Singapore Model of Economic Development**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter begins the process of furthering the argument made by Kenneth Paul Tan in his 2012 article “The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore.” In this paper, Tan argues that policies claimed by the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) in Singapore, supposedly based on apolitical pragmatism, are, in fact, not only very political but also part of the hegemony of neoliberal globalization. Because this argument is highly specific, this paper first outlines critical concepts to help readers understand the foundations of Tan’s argument and why it is important. These concepts include Hegemony as described by Antonio Gramsci, PAP pragmatism, and the Singapore Model of Economic Development. In the context of Singapore’s labor relations, these concepts are highly interrelated.

### ***Hegemony as Described by Antonio Gramsci and an Outline of PAP Pragmatism***

Hegemony as a concept was first described by Italian Communist and political thinker Antonio Gramsci while he was imprisoned by the fascist leader of Italy, Benito Mussolini, from his arrest in 1926 to his death in 1937. In short, Hegemony can be defined as “political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class.”<sup>8</sup> Often the diffusion and popularization mentioned in this definition come in the form of violent and ideological persuasion. These dual

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas R. Bates, “Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, no. 2 (1975): 352. And Helen Davis, *Understanding Stuart Hall* (London: Sage, 2004). Quoted in Kenneth Paul Tan, “The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-Liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, no. 1 (2012): 68.



tracks of how hegemony comes into being are described by Gramsci as the Political and Civic Societies. Political Society is composed of public institutions such as the government, judicial system, police, and armed forces.<sup>9</sup> Persuasion in the Political Society typically entails a monopoly of violence by a dictatorship of some form by a ruling group. In the case of Singapore, this ruling group is the PAP led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in conjunction with global capital. Gramsci posits that a pure dictatorship is not very stable because it is only backed by force. A small crack in this incomplete hegemony may lead to a different group taking charge in the political society.<sup>10</sup> The other society, Civic Society, is described by Gramsci as the area of social life, such as churches, clubs, newspapers, and parties.<sup>11</sup> Persuasion in this area is much more complicated, but successfully persuading these groups to embrace the ideas of a ruling group, in addition to rule in the Political Society, will net total hegemonic control. This does not look like society accepting a group's regime, but rather society genuinely, actively supporting it. Hegemonies can take many forms ranging from the Juche cult personality of Kim Jong Un in North Korea; to Confucianism in Imperial China; to feudal society in the Papal States of Italy. Each of these societies are dominated by different hegemonies that influenced the very fabric of society there. This paper explores how the PAP persuaded the intellectuals of Singapore to support their pragmatic ideology that placed economic growth as the highest priority, and how the PAP, as a result, was able to control the Civil Society there, thus cementing its hegemony.

In Singapore, the PAP worked to secure its rule in both the Political and Civic societies. As will be covered extensively in the coming chapters, the PAP first established its dominance as the unchallenged ruler of Singapore and then slowly convinced the various groups that make up Singapore's society that actively supporting PAP policies was in everyone's best interest. In

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<sup>9</sup> Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," 353.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 354 to 355.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 353.

practice, PAP pragmatism looked like promoting policies that increased economic growth, furthered the power of the party, or did both. Throughout this paper, many examples of PAP pragmatism in action are explored. A small case study that highlights what PAP pragmatism looks like is the party's response to Singapore's traffic issue plaguing the city in the early 1970s. The PAP's response to traffic based on what it deemed pragmatic realized tangible changes in Singapore's society. In this case, the citizens of Singapore believed in the pragmatic ideology of the PAP, trusting the party to lead their nation toward a future with less traffic.

As Singapore's economy grew in the late 1960s and early 1970s, cars became accessible to many Singaporean workers. However, traffic developed into a major issue that negatively impacted the amount of time spent on economic productivity because so many workers were stuck in traffic.<sup>12</sup> To fix this, the PAP implemented a series of heavy-handed policies over the course of the 1970s. The PAP used its strong hegemonic position at the helm of Singapore's government to push companies to stagger their shift scheduling to reduce rush hour traffic.<sup>13</sup> This involved coordinating between various industries and only relieved some traffic. Beyond this, the PAP willed into existence bus services with startup capital provided by the government. This created robust and competitive bussing companies in the transportation sector.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the PAP overhauled how Taxis operated in Singapore. Previously each Taxi driver essentially existed as a unregulated private operator. The PAP regulated the Taxi industry and provided generous financing to encourage Taxi drivers to purchase newer vehicles and continue to comply with the PAP's rules.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the PAP set up unpopular congestion pricing in downtown

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<sup>12</sup> Chin Hoong Chor, "Urban Transport Planning in Singapore," in *Planning Singapore*, edited by Belinda Yuen (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Planners, 1997), 85 and 93.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

Singapore and organized carpooling networks.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the largest effort by the PAP was the implementation of taxes on car purchases that set inaccessibly high rates, locking out many people from car ownership.<sup>17</sup> Although heavy-handed, the sum total of these policies was a massive reduction in traffic that effectively gave each Singaporean more time in the day to work or consume.<sup>18</sup>

These policy decisions by the PAP show the authoritarian nature of the party as it disregarded popular opinion in favor of increasing economic productivity time. This case study shows that the PAP would go to great lengths to implement policies that improved economic development, even if the policies caused massive societal change for marginal benefits. Paradoxically, it appears that as the PAP's track record of effectively solving large issues, such as traffic, through heavy-handed tactics grew longer, a culture was slowly created in Singapore that tolerated government overreach. In the eyes of many Singaporeans, such policies proved immensely effective in the long run, although they were initially unpopular. This chapter posits that this process slowly conditioned citizens to accept each subsequent overreach with less apprehension than the last, thus further expanding the PAP's hegemony in the Civic Society. Furthermore, because Singaporeans at a minimum accepted the PAP's policies, traffic decreased, and productivity increased, fulfilling one of the core political aims of the PAP: economic growth.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Singapore Model of Economic Development***

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<sup>16</sup> Chor, "Urban Transport Planning," 89.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 123.

The second critical concept to understand is the Singapore Model of Economic Development. Detailing the chronological development of the Singapore Model is difficult due to the simultaneous nature of its coalescence. Rather, this section details the elements of this model in an order that highlights how capital accumulation is the central element of economic growth in Singapore, and as such, a valuable example of PAP pragmatism. This section relies upon research conducted by scholar W. G. Huff in the 1990s as a framework of analysis.<sup>20</sup>

Starting as an island city-state poor in natural resources, Singapore used its geographic location, workforce, and political stability to build a strong national economy. To begin this process, the PAP first needed to consolidate control over Singapore's entire society and economy. The PAP initially came into power in Singapore by winning the 1959 elections as a coalition of liberal social reformers and labor activists. The PAP's liberal wing then crushed its labor activist wing from 1961-1963. This destroyed any effective political opposition to the PAP and brought labor on the island under its control.<sup>21</sup> Following this, the PAP pegged the value of the Singapore Dollar to the value of a series of foreign currencies that ensured its stability in the world market.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the PAP began a policy of operating the government on a balanced budget. This decision effectively turned each of its government offices into corporations that could not run a deficit without becoming insolvent.<sup>23</sup> This all ensured that if any capital was accumulated in Singapore, inflation would not render it worthless. Furthermore, the PAP

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<sup>20</sup> W. G. Huff, "What Is the Singapore Model of Economic Development?," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 19, no. 6 (1995): 735–59.

<sup>21</sup> Gareth Curless, "The Triumph of the State: Singapore's Dockworkers and the Limits of Global History, c. 1920-1965," *The Historical Journal* 57, no. 4 (2017): 1118.

<sup>22</sup> The Singapore Dollar was pegged to a series of currencies, first the British Pound Sterling, then the American Dollar, and lastly a floating number of different foreign currencies and other assets. Huff, "What Is the Singapore Model," 751.

<sup>23</sup> Katalin Völgyi. "A Successful Model of State Capitalism: Singapore," in *Seeking the Best Master: State Ownership in the Varieties of Capitalism*, edited by Miklós Szanyi, (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2019), 278.

established control over the banking system via several financial regulatory commissions that eventually coalesced into the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS).<sup>24</sup>

Also at this time, Singapore's government began to acquire large tracts of land through a series of policies, eventually controlling most of the city-state's land.<sup>25</sup> Next, the PAP began a massive public housing campaign administered by the Housing Development Board (HDB) that sought to house most of Singapore's population in government-built housing complexes instead of the slums where they resided.<sup>26</sup> Initially, these rental units were only rented to Singapore's citizens at a subsidized price, but later these units were made available for purchase by citizens (also at a subsidized price).<sup>27</sup> In addition, the PAP enforced racial quotas in public housing to ease racial tensions and destroy monoethnic enclaves.<sup>28</sup>

Singapore's housing policy had multiple important effects and is indicative of how many PAP policies mutually aided each other, producing mutually-reinforcing benefits for Singapore's economic growth. One, by effectively building so many housing complexes quickly, the PAP gained massive popular support. Two, public housing effectively cleared out the disorganized slums of the city and placed workers strategically around industrial zones where they could go to work, consume, and meet their daily needs. This made everything more efficient in the city.<sup>29</sup> Besides the economic benefits, the PAP was able to massively weaken its political opposition. Three, the PAP did this in part by destroying neighborhood ethnic kin relationships that might have posed as a power base outside of the PAP's hegemony.<sup>30</sup> Four, the PAP also modified

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<sup>24</sup> Huff, "What Is the Singapore Model," 751.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Halia, *Urban Land Rent: Singapore as a Property State* (Chichester, England: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 81 to 82.

<sup>26</sup> Asad-ul Iqbal Latif, *Lim Kim San: A Builder of Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009), 61.

<sup>27</sup> Huff, "What Is the Singapore Model," 746.

<sup>28</sup> Halia, *Urban Land Rent*, 116.

<sup>29</sup> Chin Hoong Chor, "Urban Transport Planning in Singapore," in *Planning Singapore*, edited by Belinda Yuen (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Planners, 1997), 82-85.

<sup>30</sup> Curless, "The Triumph of the State," 1121.

returns from election districts by placing citizens strategically around the island to consistently deliver solid election returns in the party's favor. Back to economic benefits, five, the HDB allowed the PAP to indirectly subsidize the wages of its workers by giving them cheap housing. This lowered the cost of living and helped ensure Singaporeans could be paid less than other national workforces while maintaining a relatively high standard of living.<sup>31</sup> Six, by paying down a mortgage rather than rent, citizens effectively began paying into savings accounts for an asset they owned rather than losing their monthly rent money to a landlord. This allowed Singaporeans to consume better, create a healthy rainy-day savings fund, and keep their capital in Singapore's banks.

This in-depth housing scheme was importantly compounded by compulsory saving policies (first implemented in 1955) that forced Singaporean citizens to put a large amount of their income into a government savings account.<sup>32</sup> Singaporean citizens could only draw from this account for a few specific things, such as medical care, retirement, and down payments on HDB-built homes. In total, Singaporean citizens effectively supported themselves without an extensive welfare state while keeping all the money they made at work in Singapore. This savings policy coincided with capital generation policies. The PAP went out of its way to bring multinational corporations to Singapore to set up factories. The PAP attracted these companies to Singapore with promises of no labor unrest, cheap wages, and low startup costs.<sup>33</sup> All of this was facilitated by different elements previously discussed, such as quashing labor opposition,

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<sup>31</sup> Unlike most assertions in this section, this one is an original idea not found in research material. The author realized this after a close reading of Anne Halia's book *Singapore as a Property State* which detailed the importance of mortgages as savings for Singaporeans and detailed rent theory.

<sup>32</sup> Huff, "What Is the Singapore Model," 753.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 740-743.

creating cheap housing, and taking over much of Singapore's land.<sup>34</sup> These companies brought their expertise, technology, and management, while the PAP provided everything else, including Singaporeans as a cheap workforce. As these workers made money, they kept the money in Singapore due to the above-mentioned saving and housing policies. This funneled usable capital to the government, which reinvested it into building up this scheme even further. While this description is simplified, it captures the essence of how a capital-hoarding feedback loop pulled Singapore out of dire poverty in the late 1950s to become a leading capitalist nation in less than a century.<sup>35</sup>

Hegemony and the Singapore Model of Economic Development go hand-in-hand in Singapore; the Model is the pragmatic ideology of the PAP materialized into real institutions and built environments. Capital accumulation schemes, housing schemes, plans to attract foreign investment, and the suppression and co-opting of labor are the direct results of PAP ideology. These things were possible due to the total political and societal control that the PAP was able to achieve. It is critical to keep in mind that the overriding concern of the PAP's pragmatic ideology is economic development to legitimize PAP rule. All parts of the Singapore Model of Economic Development are PAP pragmatic ideology materialized. This paper analyzes this all-encompassing drive for economic growth as presented by Kenneth Paul Tan by analyzing labor relations in Singapore.

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<sup>34</sup> See-Toh Kum Chun, "Planning Industrial Estates in Singapore," in *Planning Singapore*, edited by Belinda Yuen (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Planners, 1997), 54-80.

<sup>35</sup> Huff, "What Is the Singapore Model," 755.

## **Chapter Two: Labor Suppression in the Context of Decolonization (1958-1965)**

### ***Introduction***

Before any action could be taken by the PAP to implement its vision for Singapore, it first needed to have unopposed political control. This chapter answers how the PAP gained and secured its hold on power, and how labor was suppressed in Singapore. Additionally, it shows how the PAP achieved dominance in the Political Society of Singapore as a first step towards establishing a hegemony. Many of the PAP's schemes and plans were possible due to the unopposed control it was able to achieve. Using its political control, the PAP was able to nationalize most of the city-state's land, control the nation's finances, solve the problem of public housing, and attract multinational corporations. Importantly, the PAP's control allowed it to develop its economy through heavy-handed control of Singapore's capital, land, and workers. To achieve this control, the PAP smashed its political and labor opposition. By investigating how the PAP successfully took power in Singapore, this section gains insight into how important labor suppression is as a key element of the Singapore Model of Economic Development and how the PAP established its dictatorship in Singapore using its unique brand of pragmatism. This chapter specifically analyzes the 1963 mass arrest of its political rivals, dockworker labor activism, and numerical trends of union activism over time.

### ***Context***

Founded as an entrepot trading port by the British Empire in 1819, Modern Singapore is a city-state situated in the Malacca Straits, a key crossroads of global shipping routes in Southeast Asia. It grew as a Chinese city in a Malay-speaking region and was administered by the British Empire until the Japanese Empire conquered it in 1942. The process of decolonization began in



Singapore following World War II after the British re-occupied the city-state in 1945. Due to the Japanese victory over British forces in 1942, the myth of European invulnerability was thoroughly shattered in the minds of the Singaporean people.<sup>36</sup> This resulted in strikes from 1946 to 1948 led by an increasingly strong labor movement in favor of decolonization. The British government at this time, despite being ruled by a pro-labor government, came down heavily on the Singaporean strikers.<sup>37</sup>

Also at this time, the Malaysian Emergency in the neighboring British colony of Malaysia began and lasted until 1960. It is useful to think of this parallel event as a tamer Vietnam War-type conflict waged by the UK against the Malaysian Communist Party (MCP). In response to the outbreak of violence, the British authorities in concert with Malaysian authorities declared a state of emergency across Malaya. This resulted in draconian policies meant to suppress communist activity. Scholar Phillip Deery neatly summarizes what exactly the government did to suppress communist activity:

Under emergency regulations the authorities enacted a range of draconian measures, including a ban on “seditious” publications; the introduction of coercive powers of detention, arrest, trial, deportation, and “banishment”; the establishment of the death penalty for anyone carrying unauthorized firearms; and the registration of the entire adult population. On 17 July 1948 the government banned the MCP itself and carried out more than a thousand arrests.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond this, authorities set up what they called “new villages,” which were essentially internment camps for the rural population of Malaysia. These camps were surrounded by fences

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<sup>36</sup> Curless, “The Triumph of the State,” 1107.

<sup>37</sup> Curless, “The Triumph of the State,” 1111.

<sup>38</sup> Phillip Deery, “Malaya, 1948: Britain’s Asian Cold War?,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, no. 1 (2007): 29.

that controlled who could enter and leave the settlements. Here, 465 “new villages” were officially created, housing around half a million people.<sup>39</sup> Malaysia’s Chinese population is a minority compared to the Malays, as such it is unique that the Malaysian Emergency was, as scholar Anthony Short puts it, “essentially a *Chinese* affair: a Chinese communist party, Chinese Guerillas, Chinese support—and Chinese victims... the [Malaysian Emergency] was a contest for [Chinese] allegiance.”<sup>40</sup> As Singapore was a Chinese-dominated city state, this chapter suspects that the violence carried out in this conflict set an example for what might happen to other Chinese in the area if they stepped out of line. This is because the effects of the Malaysian Emergency would be particularly pronounced among the Chinese population of the Malay Peninsula. By clamping down violently and by creating internment camps, Malaysian authorities effectively defeated the Chinese-dominated MCP by 1958.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Operation Coldstore and British Foreign Office Files***

In the context of the Chinese-dominated Malaysian Emergency, a joint commission consisting of representatives from the British, Malaysian, and Singaporean governments, called the Internal Security Council, was established to handle the security of these nations in the face of local communist threats. It is here that the story of the Malaysian Emergency and story of the People’s Action Party merge. The PAP was founded in Singapore while the Malaysian Emergency was ongoing, achieving great success in the 1959 Singapore elections, which temporarily secured its grip on power. The PAP was an alliance of Singaporean elites and labor activists advocating for independence and strong state intervention in the economy. This alliance fell apart in 1961 over issues of labor rights and federation with Malaysia. The PAP split into

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<sup>39</sup>Khoo Soo Hock, “The Dilemma of New Villages in Malaysia,” *Ekistics* 46, no. 277 (1979): 236, 238.

<sup>40</sup> Anthony Short, “Communism, Race and Politics in Malaysia,” *Asian Survey* 10, no. 12 (1970): 1081.

<sup>41</sup> Deery, “Malaya, 1948,” 29-30.

two hostile parties, the PAP and the Barisan Sosialis (the Socialist Front). This division also split the PAP's associated labor unions into the National Trade Unions Congress (NTUC), backed by the PAP, and the Singapore Trade Union Congress (STUC), backed by the Barisan Sosialis.<sup>42</sup> The PAP advocated for a post-colonial future led by an elitist cadre within Malaysia, while the Barisan Sosialis promoted a Socialist future with a strong labor movement as an independent city-state. In 1963, the PAP took the initiative to integrate Singapore into the larger Federation of Malaysia. Using the opposition of the Barisan Sosialis to federation as a pretext, the PAP conspired with the British and Malaysian governments to destroy the party (which it labeled communist) and its affiliated labor unions via a nighttime police raid on February 2, 1963. This raid was called "Operation Coldstore," and 110 people were arrested in addition to influential labor leader Jamit Singh. Following this, the PAP massively triumphed in local elections and was able to realize a secure base of power and legitimacy.<sup>43</sup>

Due to Imperial British involvement in this conspiracy, declassified British Foreign Office documents provide a look behind the curtains at what happened during this time. A specific document in this collection is a letter by the Singapore Harbour Board Staff Association (SHBSA), a workers union supported by the Barisan Sosialis, to the Director General of the International Labor Organization. The letter requests the International Labour Organization act against the heavy-handed arrests of union and socialist leadership.<sup>44</sup> The British response to this letter outlines their stance on the PAP's actions towards its opposition. Section 17 of this response states that the leadership of the Barisan are Communists because they do not support Singapore joining the federation of Malaysia, "the Barisan Sosialis... and the other United Front organisations... are under the control of the Communists, who use them in their attempt to

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<sup>42</sup> Curless, "The Triumph of the State," 1118.

<sup>43</sup> Latif, *Lim Kim San*, 93, 98, and 112.

<sup>44</sup> *Internal Security Council Papers on Internal Security Situation in Singapore*, (1963), 62.

sabotage the formation of Malaysia.”<sup>45</sup> Essentially, by labeling the Barisan Sosialis “communist” in the context of the recent Malaysian Emergency, the Internal Security Council gave itself a pretext to rid Singapore of opposition to the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. Later, in a different series of documents, the British contradict themselves and state that the Barisan are in fact characteristically socialist rather than communist, “It would appear that this new party has for its platform very similar aims to those of the P.A.P. – the establishment of a non-communist, socialist, independent Malaya.”<sup>46</sup> It appears that the British government wanted to push through the formation of the Federation of Malaysia that would join Singapore and Malaysia into one nation. To do this, they labeled non-communist parties opposed to this process in Singapore “communist” as a pretext to destroy them.

To continue, this mass arrest was not the only thing the PAP, Malaysia, and the UK collaborated on to destroy the PAP’s opposition. The British government provided much intel to the PAP to help it target different institutions for attack to further the security of its regime. In a document outlining the supposed activity of the MCP, the British government discusses how the communist party infiltrated workers' unions and provided a list of unions with supposed communist sympathies. The British government warned:

[I]t must be remembered that the threat posed by communist-penetration of labour is potential... for the day when it will be used... to disrupt Government’s economic and industrial programme[s] to coerce [the] Government to accept C.P.M. policy or... to provide for a communist take-over.<sup>47</sup>

This is an all but explicit piece of advice for the PAP to take action against workers' unions using the intelligence the British provided. Furthermore, in a different document outlining how

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<sup>45</sup> *Internal Security Council Papers*, 22

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

different newspaper organizations promoted communism to undermine the PAP government, the British government advised swift action against several opposition newspapers, “the time is ripe to move against some of the major instruments of propaganda of the United Front. Action should be taken to withdraw the license of the following: - [list of newspapers].”<sup>48</sup> These documents are explicit ways the British government recommended, and the PAP carried out, an anti-communist campaign to destroy the PAP’s opposition.

### ***Case Study: Singapore’s Dockworkers***

Before, during, and after the Internal Security Council conducted mass arrests of PAP opposition, Singapore’s dockworkers experienced struggles negotiating with the PAP. Singapore’s dockworkers were interconnected with the rest of the city and fingered the pulse of labor organizing there. Thus, the status of Singapore’s dockworkers is a good litmus test to indicate the climate of labor relations in Singapore at any given historical time because Singapore’s economy mainly stemmed from its status as a major port.<sup>49</sup> Before the PAP was elected to power in Singapore, the organization of dockworkers evolved from a colonial workforce under the British Empire to a militant labor organization. Like many other places across the British Empire, colonial-era Singapore imported foreign indentured servant labor to work at the docks. Therefore, the demographics of dockworkers were ethnically diverse and mainly consisted of a variety of Chinese, Indian, and Malay people.<sup>50</sup> Later, as the British wound down the practice of moving around indentured laborers, they began to rely on local patronage networks to provide muscle on the docks. Various labor bosses provided labor from their respective ethnic groups in exchange for a cut of workers’ wages. Although this was a corrupt

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<sup>48</sup> *Internal Security Council Papers.*, 99.

<sup>49</sup> Curless, “The Triumph of the State,” 1097.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1106.

system, it also created much solidarity within racialized work gangs that labored together under these bosses.<sup>51</sup> After the Japanese occupation ended, the harbor board began to hire people directly—rather than hiring bosses to find subcontractors—but did not change the mono-ethnic nature of many work gangs. These work gangs organically formed into the Singapore Harbor Labour Union (SHLU), a powerful and militant union.<sup>52</sup> Later, with the aid of Barisan Sosialis leader Jamit Singh, this union organized the administrative staff of the harbor into the Singapore Harbour Board Staff Association (SHBSA).<sup>53</sup> The SHLU later joined the SHBSA. Circling back to the mass arrests carried out by the PAP, the SHBSA is the organization that wrote the letter to the International Labour Organization that protested the arrests carried out by the PAP. In fact, this letter was discussed in detail by the British reports to the Internal Security Council and analyzed by this chapter.<sup>54</sup>

The situation for these newly formed labor unions changed drastically after the PAP was elected to power in 1959. The PAP undermined the organizing powers of the dockworkers' unions, eradicated political threats to its power base, and subordinated them to the state. In a speech delivered to the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual NTUC Delegates Conference in 1968, after labor had been suppressed, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew highlighted just how important keeping the harbor free of strikes was to the PAP. He said, “if a [strike] ever happens here at our harbour I will declare this high treason. I will move against the strike leaders. Charges can be brought in court later. I would get the port going straightaway.”<sup>55</sup> As shown by this statement, keeping the harbor up and running was a top PAP priority. To suppress the union that could disrupt this vital

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<sup>51</sup> Curless, “The Triumph of the State,” 1104 to 1105.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1109.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1117.

<sup>54</sup> *Internal Security Council papers*, 62

<sup>55</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, Transcript of speech by the Prime Minister at the 5th Annual NTUC Delegates' Conference, 7 April 1968, in Michael D. Barr, “Trade Unions in an Elitist Society: The Singapore Story.” *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* 46, no. 4 (2000): 483.

institution, the PAP implemented a series of policies that slowly chiseled away at the autonomy of the union members and the union organization. The PAP reformed the organization of work gangs at the harbor by creating ethnically diverse work gangs. Done in the name of promoting racial harmony, this change also destroyed previously built-up ethnic kin solidarity networks that could pose a threat to PAP rule.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the PAP implemented a harbor-specific police force to clamp down on any illegal activity, keep the workers in line, and be a physical reminder of the ever-watchful eye of the state.<sup>57</sup> Organizationally, after beheading the union by arresting its chosen political candidates in the Barisan Sosialis party, the PAP additionally threatened to deregister the union if it did not fall in line with the PAP.<sup>58</sup> This was a major threat because any unregistered collective bargaining was considered illegal and could be dealt with by violence in Singapore.<sup>59</sup> Thus, union leadership was given two choices. One, accept PAP marching orders. Or two, see their union declared illegal, face total annihilation, and leave union members without institutional protection. Union rank-and-file membership and leadership ultimately selected to fall in line behind the PAP and reformed their union to become providers of labor to the PAP government and later explainers of PAP policies to the workers.<sup>60</sup>

### ***Overarching Trends in Singapore's Labor Movement***

The SHBSA experience is a case study of the general trend of labor unions at this time in Singapore. Unions were given the choice of destruction or reform. Those that reformed were made to follow the lead of the PAP within the PAP-associated NTUC. The PAP's labor suppression was unique in Singapore's labor relations history up to this point because it was

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<sup>56</sup> Curless, "The Triumph of the State," 1121.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 1122.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 1115.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1111.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 1121.

successful in bringing labor unions to heel. This contrasts with two failed British attempts at cracking down on labor unrest in Singapore in 1946 to 1948 and 1956 to 1959, using similar tactics. Writing in 1978, Hans U. Luther, a scholar in Hamburg Germany, studied the advancement and then decline of union power from 1946 to 1970 in Singapore. He juxtaposed the number of strikes, the number of workers, the number of workdays lost, and the main reasons for strikes over time to numerically show the zenith and downfall of Singapore's labor union power (see Figure 1).

Figure 1, "Strikes in Singapore"<sup>61</sup>

<i>year</i>	<i>number of strikes</i>	<i>number of persons involved</i>	<i>work-days</i>	<i>main reason</i>
1946	47	50.325	845.637	anti-colonial
1947	45	24.561	492.637	de-registration
1949	3	935	6.618	Emergency laws
1955	275	57.433	946.354	2. phase anti-colonial struggle
1956	29	12.373	454.455	de-registrations
1959	40	1.939	26.587	Lee Kuan Yew wins
1961	116	43.584	410.899	against new government of LKY
1962	88	6.647	165.124	.. ..
1969	0	0	0	result of "Employment Act"!!
1972	10	3.168	18.233	minor issues in 3. sector economy
1973	5	1.312	2.295	
1974	10	1.901	5.380	

<i>year</i>	<i>union membership</i>	<i>number of unions</i>	<i>labour force</i>
1962	189,032	122	445,000
1967	130,053	106	500,000
1970	85,400	107	650,000

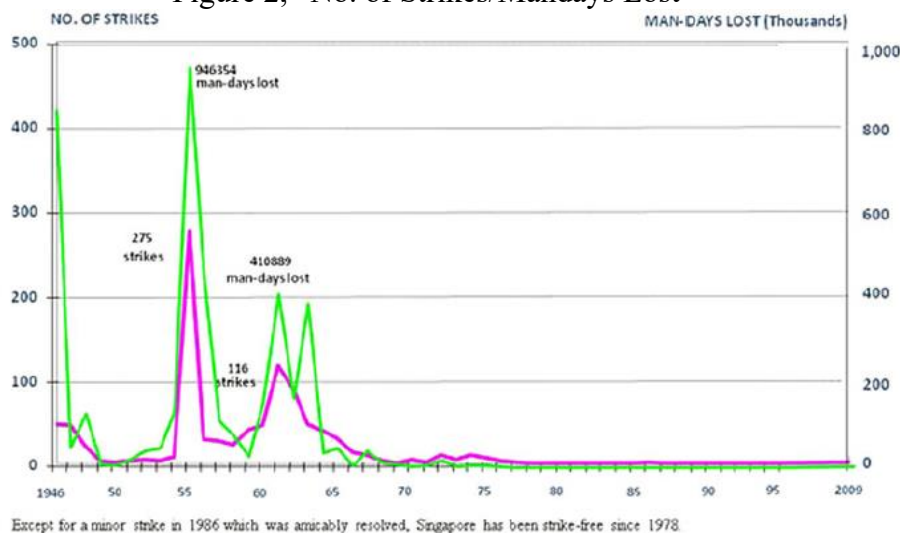
These quantitative data reflect the qualitative historical narrative detailed by other primary and secondary sources. Similar to how the dockworkers' union gained more power until the PAP smashed it in the early 1960s, union membership in Singapore generally faced similar trends of growth and decline. In reference to the above table, Luther points out that the initial

<sup>61</sup> Hans U. Luther, "Strikes and the Institutionalization of Labour Protest: The Case of Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 8, no. 2 (1978): 225.



effectiveness of strikes and solidarity of workers in 1946 after being re-occupied by the British is seen by the “845.637 [thousand]” workdays lost to strikes. Furthermore, the initially effective British response to this is reflected by the drastic drop to only “6 [thousand]” workdays lost in 1949. This did not last, however, since, as detailed in the historical narrative, strikes returned along with increasing union power in the late 1950s until the PAP took power. Luther notes that the climax of “410 [thousand]” workdays lost in 1961 to the drop to “0” workdays lost in 1969 shows the PAP’s highly effective crackdown on unions. Following the PAP crackdown, Luther concludes that labor did not make a powerful comeback as it did under the British. Rather, it stayed subordinated as shown by the lack of workdays lost to strikes continuing into the 1970s. This is further shown by Figure 2, which charts the number of strikes in Singapore and the number of workdays lost over time. The chart clearly reflects the conclusion that labor organizing was effectively destroyed after the PAP took power and never regained its footing. After the strikes of the early 1960s, close to zero strikes and workdays were lost until this chart’s data end in 2000. Labor was effectively crushed by the PAP.

Figure 2, “No. of Strikes/Mandays Lost”<sup>62</sup>



<sup>62</sup> Peter Sheldon, Bernard Gan, and David Morgan, "Making Singapore's Tripartism Work (Faster): The Formation of the Singapore National Employers' Federation in 1980," *Business History* 57, no. 3 (2015): 442.

This numerical and historical data beg the question, why was labor successfully suppressed by the PAP when previous British attempts failed? Author Gareth Curless suggests that the PAP succeeded because it was not a colonial administration.<sup>63</sup> A rallying cause of previous labor militancy was decolonization. As shown by Figure 2, effective labor militancy dissipated once Singapore gained its independence from the British Empire under a PAP government. Furthermore, labor was subordinated because, in addition to threatening unions with destruction if they did not fall in line, the PAP used decolonization to attract unions to their cause.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the PAP was able to coopt a politically apathetic, organized workforce willing to accept the PAP's program through a system of great rewards and serious punishments.

### *Conclusion*

As many scholars recognize, the Singapore Model of Economic Development requires a strong central government that can carry out long-term plans without opposition to its policies. By destroying its political opposition and subordinating labor, the PAP created a strong position from which it could begin to implement its plan to develop Singapore's economy. Thus, the foundation upon which the Singapore Model is built consists of violent acts and unfree measures. This is evidence of the first stages of the PAP's decades-long struggle to establish a hegemony based on its notions of pragmatism among Singapore's labor force. Hegemonies require other groups to be persuaded to think like the dominant group in both the political and civil societies of their community. The establishment of the PAP's regime reveals how the PAP persuaded all other groups in Singapore's society—through violent and non-violent means—to allow it to rule in the political society, but not yet in the civil society. While the PAP established a solid

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<sup>63</sup> Curless, "The Triumph of the State."

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 1111.

foundation from which it could build its hegemony based on pragmatic ideology in Singapore, it still had much work left to do to gain the active support of Singapore's population.

It is important to keep in mind that all aforementioned British support was given after receiving a request for support from the PAP.<sup>65</sup> The PAP wanted to secure its tenuous hold on power by destroying its opposition by any means necessary. The PAP seized upon the British desire to form the Federation of Malaysia, the Barisan Sosialis's opposition to federating with Malaysia into a larger nation, and the air of successful decolonization to destroy its opposition. Due to the interdependent nature of organized labor and the PAP's political opposition, when the PAP attacked both, its offensives were augmented by its simultaneous assault on each group's sister branch. The PAP seized upon a unique historical moment created by the British politically decolonizing Singapore to simultaneously gain international backing for a quiet coup, destroy its opposition, and suppress the labor movement in Singapore. The large number of seats the PAP amassed in subsequent elections was, at least initially, artificially created through authoritarian and undemocratic means.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Curless, "The Triumph of the State," 1119.

<sup>66</sup> Latif, *Lim Kim San*, 93, 98, and 122.

### Chapter Three: An About-Face: Co-opting Labor into PAP Hegemony (1965-1979)

#### *Introduction*

After being booted from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, the PAP lurched from one crisis to another, assembled a body of ad hoc policies as it went, and formed the foundation of the Singapore Model of Economic Development in the process. The PAP's previous efforts to secure power in the early 1960s had netted it firm political control of Singapore, which it used to create a quickly growing economy focused on cheap export-oriented manufacturing. While this state of affairs kept the PAP in power, party leadership concluded that the economy of Singapore would quickly reach a ceiling in the near future if they did not change their economic goals. This was a major problem for the pragmatic economic-growth-obsessed PAP. Under the continued leadership of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the PAP concluded that Singapore must massively reform its labor relations so it could better organize production around skill-intensive quality manufacturing.<sup>67</sup>

A large part of this transition involved what the PAP called the "modernisation of labour."<sup>68</sup> This rhetorical equation of PAP policy and modernity, however, hides the real intention of this idea to secure further means for Singaporean economic growth in conjunction with international capital. Highly nationalistic in nature, this PAP idea hoped to go beyond subordinating workers' unions to stop labor disputes and persuade unions to actively support Singapore's economic growth. This is to say that the PAP hoped to create a labor force consisting of workers who would actively support the economic growth of their employer and

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<sup>67</sup> "Since the early 1950s, we have had chronic unemployment. By the first half of this year, we had overcome the redundancy problems. Today, there is only frictional unemployment workers on the move in search of better jobs. Now we have to take some fundamental decisions on what kind of society we want to be. I say let us raise our sights, let us aim at quality and not quantity. From now on, we will choose industries which are more skill-intensive, more sophisticated in production, and can, therefore, pay higher wages."

Lee Kuan Yew, "Aiming for Quality, not Quantity," in *The papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews, and Dialogues*, vol. 5, (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 91.

<sup>68</sup> This is the British spelling used by the PAP, however, this paper uses the American spelling for clarity.

Singapore's economy as a whole—rather than take on confrontational attitudes towards anyone in conflict with the interests of workers.<sup>69</sup> To foster the creation of such "modern" workers in Singapore, the PAP implemented several policies. This transition to working with and promoting labor unions was an abrupt about-face in PAP policy and is therefore an excellent example of the PAP's ideology of pragmatism that maximized economic growth. This section will explore three of the most effective of these policies: hosting a seminar to disseminate PAP thinking to the leadership of labor, creating joint NTUC leadership between union and PAP leadership, and creating tripartite institutions.

### *Context*

Before exploring these three avenues of labor modernization, it is crucial to understand complex terms and historical context that highlight why this transition was such a drastic policy change. First, it is key to understand that low-skilled, export-oriented manufacturing was the dominant force behind Singapore's growing industrial economy in the 1960s. This particular type of industry is reminiscent of the type of manufacturing seen in China following its opening up to the world under Deng Xiaoping and industry in sweatshops across the modern world. Because of the low amount of skill needed, this type of manufacturing does not require workers to actively support the government; they just need to accept it. Closely related to this, the "Modernisation of Labour" was a PAP prerogative that prompted unions to work towards the economic growth of their employers and Singapore as a whole. To facilitate this new cooperation between labor and other parties, the concept of Tripartism was established. Tripartism is an arrangement of economic activity coordinated via negotiations between government,

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<sup>69</sup> Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, "The Crucial Role of Trade Unions in the Modernization of Singapore," in *Why Labour Must Go Modern! The NTUC Case for a Modernized Labour Movement* (Singapore: National Trades Union Congress, 1970), 32-33.

corporations, and labor.<sup>70</sup> The International Labour Organization defines Tripartism as “the process by which workers, employers, and governments contribute to the setting of work place standards and the protection of workers’ rights worldwide.”<sup>71</sup> Finally, as previously stated, the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) is the umbrella workers’ union associated with the PAP. The PAP pushed most independent unions in Singapore into the NTUC, and it evolved to become the voice of labor in Singapore’s tripartite system.<sup>72</sup>

Beyond these key terms related to the PAP’s push towards modernizing labor, the reality of organized labor in Singapore looked grim. The government of the United Kingdom intended to pull its troops out of Singapore in the early 1970s. In the late 1960s, however, around twenty percent of Singapore’s GDP came from British military spending, and many of the best unionized jobs worked as military contractors.<sup>73</sup> To head off labor unrest that would surely result from the impending British withdrawal, the PAP passed the *Employment Act* of 1968 that curtailed the power of organized labor.<sup>74</sup> This policy, in conjunction with policies that suppressed labor outlined in Chapter Two, contributed to a massive decline in union membership and activity. Paid-up union membership dropped from 90,499 to 51,896 workers.<sup>75</sup> This drop indicates a weakening labor movement due to an antagonism from the PAP. In this context, the PAP’s intention to switch its strategy from active suppression to promoting and working with labor is an extreme about-face. While this switch may be confusing at first, it makes sense when considering that this move was a pragmatic one to maximize economic growth. The PAP shifted its approach because it believed that for Singapore’s economy to continue its economic growth,

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<sup>70</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, “Making Singapore’s Tripartism,” 440.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>73</sup> G.G. Thompson, “Political and Social Options for Organised Labour,” in *Why Labour Must Go Modern! The NTUC Case for a Modernized Labour Movement* (Singapore: National Trades Union Congress, 1970), 86; Latif, *Lim Kim San*, 163.

<sup>74</sup> Chwee Huat Tan, *Employment Relations in Singapore*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1999), 167, 180.

<sup>75</sup> *Why Labour Must Go Modern!*, 52-53.

it needed to have the active support of labor. It aimed to co-opt labor into a political force to further legitimize PAP governance, be a productive force in Singapore's economy, and be a friendly party in tripartite negotiations.<sup>76</sup>

### ***NTUC Seminar, Why Labour Must go Modern***

A unique quirk of the PAP's system is a tendency for PAP leadership to speak directly to the citizens of Singapore to explain PAP policy.<sup>77</sup> In this particular case, in 1969 the top brass of the PAP hosted a seminar with an audience of NTUC leadership entitled *Why Labour Must Go Modern*. Leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew (Prime Minister), Devan Nair (PAP-affiliated NTUC leader and future President of Singapore), Sinnathamby Rajaratnam (Minister for Labour and Foreign Affairs), and Goh Keng Swee (Minister of Finance) spoke directly to the leadership of the NTUC. The goal of this seminar was to persuade this group of union leaders to follow the PAP into a new era of labor relations. Specifically, this seminar hoped to persuade labor leaders to adopt the PAP's new ideas that labor unions should focus on increasing economic growth in Singapore because, they reasoned, increasing economic productivity was in the best interest of all Singaporeans. Sinnathamby Rajaratnam put it best in a speech at this seminar when he said, "In the Singapore of today modernization and economic development are the overriding considerations."<sup>78</sup> The PAP argued that elevating the national interest of Singapore above the interest of labor unions was crucial because only the PAP had the technical expertise to guide

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<sup>76</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, "Making Singapore's Tripartism," 447.

<sup>77</sup> Many PAP leaders speak to the public to convince them of their policy choices. An example of this is when Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew explained his policy advocating for federation with Malaysia over a series of radio interviews. Lee Kuan Yew, *The Battle for Merger*, (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2014).

<sup>78</sup> Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, "The Crucial Role of Trade Unions," 32.

Singapore forward.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, the PAP argued that if they were not in power, economic growth would stagnate; then, economic disaster would follow and Singapore would once again be conquered by another alien power.<sup>80</sup>

These arguments made by the PAP are evidence for Kenneth Paul Tan's argument that this paper seeks to further. Tan argues that the hegemonic ideology of pragmatism is tied to economic growth because it is the best claim to legitimacy that the PAP has. However, he also notes that the PAP employs rhetoric that obscures this emphasis on economic growth. The PAP often touts Singapore's stable and effective government in addition to the fact that the PAP guided Singapore to become an independent nation—but again, these are only further cover arguments that in reality rely on economic growth as the main legitimizing factor beneath the surface.<sup>81</sup> In one of the opening speeches of this seminar, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam spoke to what union leadership should take away from this seminar, "It is up to the leaders of the NTUC to convince the new generation of workers that modernization and industrialization are goals worth pursuing because in them are guarantees of a better, more secure and more satisfying life for themselves."<sup>82</sup> This speech neatly fits into the narrative of the PAP expanding its hegemony into Singapore's Civil Society. While it is not a smoking gun, it reveals that the attitude of the PAP regarding expanding their hegemony is in line with the definition given in Chapter One.<sup>83</sup> Through this seminar and other efforts to modernize labor, the PAP persuaded NTUC leaders who lived in civil society (outside of the political society) to adopt and disseminate the PAP's line of thinking. By adopting this line of thinking that promotes economic growth, labor leaders

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<sup>79</sup> Devan Nair, "The Preconditions for Progress," in *Why Labour Must Go Modern! The NTUC Case for a Modernized Labour Movement* (Singapore: National Trades Union Congress, 1970), 5.

<sup>80</sup> Rajaratnam, "The Crucial Role of Trade Unions," 30.

<sup>81</sup> Tan, "The Ideology of Pragmatism," 87.

<sup>82</sup> Rajaratnam, "The Crucial Role of Trade Unions," 34.

<sup>83</sup> Hegemony is "political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class," from Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," 353.



could be brought into the PAP's hegemonic ideology of pragmatism. Ultimately, this seminar was a way for the PAP to disseminate its ideas to further propagate its hegemonic hold on power and give it an ideological foundation that can be used to explain other actions of the PAP.

### ***NTUC Leadership***

In its effort to modernize labor in Singapore, the PAP began a policy that saw PAP technocrats and Members of Parliament elected to NTUC leadership. Additionally, immense decision-making powers were placed in the hands of a few grassroots leaders.<sup>84</sup> This change in the composition of leadership was intended to bring the NTUC closer into agreement with the PAP and to contribute to the larger labor modernization effort.<sup>85</sup> And, since the goal of modernizing labor was to persuade unions and their membership to work in the national interest, it was hoped that exchanging leadership between the NTUC and PAP would result in PAP priorities becoming NTUC policies, as NTUC decision-makers would be part of the PAP.<sup>86</sup> Two important examples of this exchange are the careers of Devan Nair and Phey Yew Kok.

Devan Nair had a long history with the PAP. He was a labor leader in Singapore during the decolonization period post-Japanese occupation of Singapore, an early PAP member, a key labor leader in the NTUC, and a future President of Singapore.<sup>87</sup> Famously, the British government arrested Nair along with a few other party members, but he was later released due to pressure from the PAP.<sup>88</sup> Nair's career is exemplary of how many labor leaders from the PAP joined the NTUC to organize it in line with the pragmatic vision of the government. Under his

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<sup>84</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, "Making Singapore's Tripartism 446.; Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 484.

<sup>85</sup> Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 484.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>87</sup> Peter H. L. Lim, *Chronicle of Singapore, 1959-2009: Fifty Years of Headline News* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet in association with National Library Board, 2009), 173.

<sup>88</sup> Lim, *Chronicle of Singapore*.

leadership, Nair organized the Seminar Why Labour Must Go Modern and spearheaded efforts to modernize labor until the late 1970s. Nair ultimately resigned and was replaced by Lim Chee Onn, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's hand-picked successor, during a turnover in leadership, as a part of another effort to change Singapore's economy in the 1980s.<sup>89</sup>

Conversely, Phey Yew Kok was a grassroots leader of the NTUC who worked his way into powerful NTUC leadership positions rather than being appointed. At the time of the N.T.U.C Ordinary Delegates Conference in 1972, he was the President of the NTUC's Central Committee.<sup>90</sup> He later made major strides to bring Chinese-educated workers into the NTUC and was elected as a Member of Parliament as a member of the PAP.<sup>91</sup> Despite these achievements, Phey was corrupt and was accused of misusing around one-hundred-thousand Singapore Dollars worth of union funds. Claiming he would be under constant police supervision if released, he convinced two of his associates to front his bail: he then fled Singapore.<sup>92</sup> Phey's career working his way up to the top of organized labor in Singapore and the immense amount of decision-making power placed in his hands are indicative of the second half of the PAP's joint-leadership policy. Unfortunately, Phey chose to abuse this power, but others like him did not. These grassroots leaders operated as capable administrators of the NTUC and were given immense executive decision-making powers.

In the bigger picture of labor outside of these two anecdotes (that show how this policy succeeded—and failed), the policy had a major impact on the composition of NTUC leadership. Scholar Hans U. Luther estimates that twelve percent of NTUC leadership were PAP Members

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<sup>89</sup> Lim, *Chronicle of Singapore*, 159.

<sup>90</sup> *N.T.U.C. Ordinary Delegates' Conference* (Singapore: Printed by Silo & Pieu Print. Co-operative, 1972), 2.

<sup>91</sup> Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 484; Lim, *Chronicle of Singapore*, 162.

<sup>92</sup> Lim, *Chronicle of Singapore*, 162.

of Parliament.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, the PAP was able to exert a considerable amount of influence on the day-to-day operations of the NTUC in addition to its larger goals as an organization. This effort fits neatly into the story of how the PAP established its hegemonic rule in Singapore as it pragmatically used its internal membership to influence the actions and ideas of NTUC leadership and membership. The PAP created a network of leaders who would follow the PAP's ideology of pragmatism and scored a major victory in the Civil Society of Singapore.

### *The Creation of Tripartism in Singapore*

Before attempting to establish Tripartism in Singapore's economy, the PAP suppressed labor and worked with multinational corporations in the city-state to jumpstart the economy with low-skill industry. This policy was carried out using violence and labor suppression that both secured the PAP's grip on power and attracted many multinational companies. As detailed in Chapter Two, these corporations set up factories and invested in Singapore's economy to take advantage of a suppressed and cheap labor force. When the PAP formed a new partnership with organized labor, however, this dualistic labor system with corporations and government on top was disrupted. Speaking to PAP leadership at the Seminar Why Labour Must Go Modern, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam outlined the need for tripartite institutions,

[M]odernization and rapid economic development can be put through in Singapore with the least sacrifice and least discomfort if the operation is undertaken as a joint effort by Government, entrepreneurs and workers. This means that all three must make modernization and economic development their common objective and overriding consideration.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Luther, "Strikes and the Institutionalization," 227.

<sup>94</sup> Rajaratnam, "The Crucial Role of Trade Unions," 32-33.

The best way forward, in the eyes of the PAP, was to modernize labor and have the government administer Singapore's economic growth via good-faith discussions between labor, corporations, and government. From this point forward, the PAP and labor increasingly moved in lockstep as union leadership slowly bought into the PAP's narrative of working for the national interest. The NTUC became the voice of labor, the PAP the voice of government, and two employers' associations—the Singapore Employer's Federation (SEF) and the National Employer's Council (NEC)—formed the voice of corporations.<sup>95</sup>

All parties that made up the three groups interested in economic growth met formally in the National Wages Council (NWC), a tripartite institution established in 1972, to suggest nationwide wages for Singapore's workers. Interestingly, the wages suggested by the NWC were just that, suggestions. To lend legitimacy to these suggested wages, the PAP implemented the NWC's recommendations annually. Due to the heavy influence of the PAP over Singapore and the other two negotiating parties of the NWC, the government was able to persuade corporations to follow its lead and pay their workers based on NWC guidelines. This arrangement worked fine for all parties because it spurred economic growth. Interestingly, workers also benefitted monetarily from this situation because the NWC recommended regular wage increases.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, these tripartite negotiations also removed wage negotiations from new union contracts. A critical drawback of the NWC, however, was that despite being a publicly accessible and transparent organization, most important deals were struck behind closed doors at private social gatherings.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, "Making Singapore's Tripartism," 443 to 444.

<sup>96</sup> Venkatraman Anantaraman. *Singapore Industrial Relations System* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Management, 1990), 195.

<sup>97</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, "Making Singapore's Tripartism," 448.

While the NWC was the most influential tripartite body, it was not the only tripartite institution. According to research conducted in the article, “Making Tripartism Work Faster...,” the Industrial Arbitration Court (IAC) was established in 1960 to arbitrate industrial disputes. This court was based on an Australian industrial relations arbitrations model and was never meant to serve as a holistic tripartite body like the NWC. Evidently, the court operated in an unbiased manner and was able to get the government, labor, and corporations to take each other seriously.<sup>98</sup> Ultimately, however, this court was realized during a period of increasing labor suppression by the PAP and watched as labor was smashed throughout the 1960s. As the 1970s progressed, the IAC gradually came under the influence of the PAP like many other aspects of tripartite relations in Singapore.

In sum, the PAP effectively planned and implemented Tripartism in Singapore in an effort to modernize Singapore’s labor force and continue economic growth. Attempts for Tripartism had started ad hoc with the IAC, but ultimately began with the establishment of the NWC. Through establishing Tripartism and controlling tripartite institutions, the PAP showcased its unique pragmatic approach to growing Singapore’s economy and was able to maintain its monopoly on power. This granted the PAP further control in the Political Society of Singapore to further strengthen its hegemony.

## ***Conclusion***

Hegemony of a group is established when that group is able to persuade other groups of people in a society to support it in both the Political Society of actual control and the Civil Society of how the community thinks. In the realm of Singaporean labor, the PAP continued to push its hegemony onto workers in Singapore’s Civil Society to further promote economic

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<sup>98</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, “Making Singapore’s Tripartism,” 444 to 445.

growth. From the late 1960s to 1979, the PAP promoted economic growth by pushing for a modernization of labor. The PAP hosted a seminar to disseminate these ideas, worked within the NTUC to push these ideas onto the union, and created tripartite institutions to promote economic growth. All of this worked to expand the PAP's hegemony by attempting to convince multiple groups in Singapore that the interests of the PAP were in the best interests for everyone in Singapore. In sum, however, these policies failed to totally win over the entire population of Singapore to the PAP's view. This set the stage for further attempts to convince Singaporeans outside of leadership positions to actively support the PAP's pragmatic ideology.

## **Chapter Four: State-led Tripartism (1979 to 1985)**

### ***Introduction***

In the late 1970s, the leadership of the People's Action Party (PAP) decided that the next step for Singapore's economy would be a "Second Industrial Revolution," to move the city-state's economy into the realm of high-skilled, value-added manufacturing. Similar to the previous attempt by the PAP to improve Singapore's manufacturing output (as covered in Chapter Three), this "Second Industrial Revolution" entailed consequential economic reorganization. Specifically, to encourage the creation of new value-added industry, the PAP moved to further dominate the tripartite system in Singapore by totally taking over the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), creating a new employers' association, and implementing different labor-management techniques in Singaporean workplaces. All of these actions expanded the PAP's influence over Singapore's labor, employers, and society. The PAP infiltrated the labor movement to such an extent that the NTUC no longer worked with the PAP but actively supported it. Ultimately, all of these changes successfully continued the creation of immense economic growth in Singapore. This section draws from the work of historians Peter Sheldon and Michael Barr. Analyzing their work in conjunction with PAP primary source material from speeches and seminars reveals how the PAP was successful in expanding its hegemony in Singapore by shifting tripartism from promoting efficient industrial relations to becoming a medium of implementing policy.<sup>99</sup>

### ***The PAP's Expanded Control of the NTUC***

In the late 1970s, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew directed the PAP to abandon its previous strategy of granting equal power to both PAP technocrats and grassroots leaders in the

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<sup>99</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, "Making Singapore's Tripartism," 451.

NTUC. Instead, going forward, the PAP would quash any independent power base of grassroots union leadership within the NTUC in favor of leaving PAP technocrats and politicians as the sole decision-makers within the umbrella union.<sup>100</sup> This policy was put in place shortly after Phey Yew Kok fled Singapore to evade corruption charges. While from the outside Phey's actions seem to serve nicely as motivation behind this change of policy, historian Michael Barr argues that the policy was already in the works and would have been implemented regardless. Barr argues that the policy was primarily implemented to further secure PAP power over labor unions, and, as a secondary effect, to prevent grassroots union leaders outside the PAP like Phey Yew Kok from receiving decision-making power.<sup>101</sup> As covered in Chapter Three, in the 1970s, the PAP placed a great amount of decision-making power into the hands of a few grassroots labor leaders who worked with the PAP.

Going forward, decision-making positions within the NTUC would instead be filled by handpicked party members to ensure total control over the labor union. This policy was successfully implemented and saw party members totally take over decision-making within the NTUC. Interestingly, however, rather than creating a situation where labor would follow every whim of the PAP, it appears that this policy instead motivated those appointed to leadership positions within the NTUC to genuinely advocate for labor within broader PAP goals. In the context of this paper, the development of placing party members into NTUC leadership is important because it shows how the PAP expanded its hegemony to such an extent that politicking within the normally lock-step PAP became a real avenue for advocacy. The PAP was no longer just a party that ruled Singapore, but rather the PAP was the government of Singapore.

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<sup>100</sup> Lee Kuan Yew to Lim Chee Onn, 9 April 1983, in Lee, *Prime Minister's Speeches, Interviews, Statements, etc.* (Singapore: Prime Minister's Office, 1959-90), in Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 483.

<sup>101</sup> Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 485-485.



As such, labor relations were conducted within the internal party apparatus of the People's Action Party.

The transition of NTUC leadership from a hybrid of PAP and grassroots leaders is best seen in the makeup of the highest levels of leadership of the NTUC. By combing through a wide variety of PAP publications, Barr created a useful chart that outlines PAP leadership within the NTUC from 1980 to 1985. This chart, Figure 3, is seen below.

Figure 3, "NTUC Positions Held by PAP MPs 1980-85"<sup>102</sup>

NTUC Positions Held by PAP MPs 1980-85 <sup>30</sup>						
	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
President	Not held by a PAP MP					
Vice Presidents	Positions not yet created					1 out of 3
Chairman	Held by a future PAP MP				1	Position abolished
	(Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon was Chairman from 1980-84, and thereafter became a Vice President.)					
Secretary General	1					
	Held by a Cabinet Minister at all times.					
Deputy Secretaries General	2 out of 3			2 out of 2		
	(Dr Wan Soon Bee was one of the DSGs throughout this period. He was also appointed Political Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office in October 1982, and in September 1983 was made a Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office.)					
Assistant Secretaries General	Positions not yet created			1 out of 2		3 out of 4

As Figure 3 shows, the NTUC's top leadership positions within the Central Committee and NTUC Secretariat were each filled by a majority of PAP technocrats. This gave the PAP majority power within each position and a near monopoly on voting power within the entire NTUC block of leadership. This situation stands in stark contrast to the 1970s, when there was a much more even distribution of PAP to grassroots leadership within these top decision-making bodies.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 487.

<sup>103</sup> *N.T.U.C. Ordinary Delegates' Conference*, 2.

Beyond this general transition of leadership, one case of PAP-inserted leadership stands out as particularly consequential to the story of the PAP's expanding hegemony. Ong Teng Cheong was hand-picked by the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, to hold the position of Secretary General (a leadership position of the NTUC that had wide decision-making powers). Importantly, Ong was a key figure within the PAP. Barr notes that Ong was "not a routine candidate," because he had held multiple high-ranking positions within the PAP throughout his career. Therefore, he was a key player within the PAP, a possible successor to Lee Kuan Yew, and someone who could operate not in lockstep with the rest of the PAP leadership.<sup>104</sup> Ong replaced Lim Chee Onn who, in the position of General Secretary, had led efforts to modernize labor in the late 1970s. Barr notes that at this time there was much rebellious union activity within the NTUC against the PAP technocrats placed into leadership positions.<sup>105</sup> Once he became Secretary General, Ong squashed this dissident union activity and began implementing PAP policy. The sudden disappearance of dissident union activity, however, is suspicious because switching one PAP technocrat for another does not seem like a major shift in leadership that would quell dissent.

While he was a hand-picked technocrat, Ong fostered a unique environment within the NTUC that gave himself much respect and authority. Barr notes that it is likely Ong created a negotiated power within the NTUC that stopped union discontent but motivated union leaders to follow PAP policy. Ong appears to have represented the genuine interests of the union within the PAP and in the economy.<sup>106</sup> As Secretary General, he fought for union benefits, gave union leadership protection from consequences for union advocacy, and provided them access to

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<sup>104</sup> Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 490.

<sup>105</sup> Lee Kuan Yew to Lim Chee Onn, 9 April 1983, in Lee, *Prime Minister's Speeches*, in Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 483.

<sup>106</sup> Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 491.

government through himself.<sup>107</sup> For example, he promoted a union-led policy of asking for a pay cut amidst a recession in the mid-1980s—in opposition to Lee Kuan Yew who did not want workers to take the pay cut.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, Ong approved of something rarely seen in Singapore: a strike. At this time in Singapore, this was a big deal because strikes were considered, in many cases, tantamount to treason. In light of this, Ong's decision to go ahead with a strike shows the extent to which he was willing to go to bat for NTUC union membership.

The NTUC, and by extension Singapore's labor, was thus successfully brought into the PAP fold by abandoning the previously independent power bases of various grassroots leaders in exchange for following the leadership of PAP technocrat Ong Teng Cheong. Taking a step back, the PAP's dominance in NTUC leadership positions and Ong's leadership of the NTUC outlines a massively expanded PAP hegemony. The PAP, through negotiated power that successfully convinced labor leadership that their best interests were the national interests, was able to expand its hegemony to such an extent that politics almost exclusively occurred within the party apparatus.

### *Creating the SNEF*

Going into the 1980s in Singapore, both the city state's government and labor unions were heavily dominated by the PAP; however, Singapore's employers' federations continued to escape the total domination of the party. The Singapore Employers Federation (SEF) and National Employers Council (NEC) both represented corporations in tripartite negotiations. The SEF mainly represented the interests of medium to large European and American multinational corporations while the NEC represented small to medium Japanese and local business interests.

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<sup>107</sup> Barr, "Trade Unions in an Elitist Society," 491.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 491.

These two groups operated as a base of power in Singapore capable of acting outside of PAP control. This separate power base was created when the PAP made its first steps to grow its economy in the 1960s. At this time many policies were implemented to attract foreign corporations to set up shop by giving them preferential treatment at great cost to many Singaporeans (who had little option but to take up dangerous work in these pioneer industries). As the hegemony of the PAP and the economy of Singapore grew, however, the power of these foreign corporations slowly diminished. In November 1979, PAP leadership pushed for a merger of the SEF and NEC into a new organization that would represent all employers in Singapore, the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF).

The SEF and NEC willingly joined together into the SNEF well after the initial appearance of other tripartite organizations, such as the National Wages Council (NWC), in the early 1970s. According to business historian Peter Sheldon, the creation of the SNEF would have made economic sense since the early 1970s, but there was not enough political will to make such a thing happen until the creation of the SNEF was willed into existence by the PAP. Evidently, despite employers having an upper hand in labor negotiations, in tripartite negotiations, the SEF and NEC were in equal or lesser positions to negotiate compared to the PAP. Since its ascension to power, the PAP had built up a very strong state apparatus and held immense independent economic power outside of its legislative and police powers. This was due to heavy government intervention in many aspects of the economy outside of manufacturing via state-owned companies. For example, the Housing Development Board (HDB) was the largest and most popular landlord in Singapore even though it was run by the government as a public housing provider.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, when the NWC was first established in 1972, it was able to spread its non-binding wage recommendations across Singapore in large part because the PAP

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<sup>109</sup> Huff, "What Is the Singapore Model," 753.

implemented its recommendations in their state-owned companies (which made up 14-16% of all manufacturing in Singapore in 1974).<sup>110</sup> This wage paid by the PAP then set the standard wages across Singapore, forcing privately-owned companies to follow suit.<sup>111</sup>

In the eyes of the PAP, having two employers' associations was not pragmatic. Sheldon notes that these two organizations that represented similar groups created overlapping, competing interests; promoted small individual members influencing large negotiations; and ensured two business groups had to be consulted by labor and govern in a system that called for three negotiating parties. The creation of the SNEF as a merger of the SEF and NEC was a pragmatic solution to each issue and expanded the PAP's hegemony. Creating one negotiating party pushed all employers into one group, meaning that there would not be competing interests because disputes would be resolved internally within one association. Furthermore, minority interests could be ignored for the sake of the larger whole, and tripartite negotiations would have one fewer group to talk with while leaving no one out of the picture. In total, the SEF and NEC were motivated to resolve these issues because it benefitted them by making tripartite negotiations more efficient and less complicated.<sup>112</sup>

Despite their cooperation, however, small-to-medium businesses were hurt by the merger in the long run.<sup>113</sup> Unfortunately for everyone that was not a large corporation in the SNEF, the coincidental push by the PAP towards a "Second Industrial Revolution" in Singapore in conjunction with the loss of power in negotiations for smaller businesses drove many small-to-medium size businesses out of Singapore or into insolvency.<sup>114</sup> The PAP pushed for high-skill,

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<sup>110</sup> S. Y. Lee, "Public enterprise and economic development in Singapore," *Malayan Economic Review* vol. 21, no. 2 (1974), in Huff, "What Is the Singapore Model," 743.

<sup>111</sup> Anantaraman, *Singapore Industrial Relations System*, 195.

<sup>112</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, "Making Singapore's Tripartism," 452-453.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

value-added industry; if a business did not fit that mold, their policies worked against it. Ultimately, the merger and the “Second Industrial Revolution” policy were successful for the PAP, as these developments fostered further advanced industries in Singapore and increased the hegemony of the PAP. Before the creation of the SNEF, the PAP had to contend with small companies not inclined to follow the wage increase recommendations of the PAP and that existed as a separate part of the economy outside of PAP influence. Now that these businesses were gone or replaced by more high-quality industries, the power and wealth of the PAP increased. Additionally, two separate poles of power outside of the PAP’s sphere of influence were merged into one organization that was overall slightly weaker than the two organizations separately. In this situation, the PAP was able to further expand its power into the vacuum left and influence the creation of the new organization. In sum, the creation of the SNEF further developed Tripartism in Singapore and continued to expand the PAP’s hegemony by coercing corporations to follow their lead and further fall under the influence of their hegemonic ideology of pragmatism.

### ***Importing Japanese Labor Management Techniques***

The expectations for Singapore’s workers further evolved going into the 1980s. Under the umbrella idea of modifying Singapore’s Tripartism to best realize a “Second Industrial Revolution,” the PAP planned to spread new management techniques, such as implementing joint consultation and importing Japanese labor organization models. The process by which this new course of action was decided upon, researched, and put into practice reveals much about how the PAP’s evolving pragmatism operated. Exploring this process and what its consequences

were for Singapore's workforce highlights the further expansion of the PAP's pragmatic ideology.

To successfully implement joint consultation, in 1983 the NTUC brought together leaders from the SNEF, the PAP, and labor for a tripartite convention called the Tripartite Convention on Work Excellence Through Joint Consultation.<sup>115</sup> This convention was outside of the typical public and private avenues of dialogue within Singapore's Tripartism. Typically, conversations about Singapore's workforce occurred behind closed doors or within the context of one of the many tripartite organizations that proliferated throughout Singapore.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, that labor (via the NTUC) hosted this conference shows the degree to which the PAP influenced the actions of labor going into the 1980s. Joint consultation heavily favors employers in the workplace and essentially relegates employees to rely on the goodwill of the company for their pay and benefits. By hosting this conference in favor of joint consultation, the NTUC revealed that they supported a policy that would make advocating for union benefits actively more difficult. This policy was likely possible because the NTUC was so thoroughly taken over by the PAP that the organization now served to promote the national interest rather than the interests of its members.

Similar to the modernization of labor campaign covered in Chapter Three, in a nutshell, joint consultation is an idealized work environment where every person at a job site, including management, floor workers, and union officials, work together to maximize the economic output of the company.<sup>117</sup> This philosophy demands that workers not only go along with what would maximize the economic output of the company, but that they also actively participate with enthusiasm. In joint consultation, workers were expected to participate without discussing other

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<sup>115</sup> *Tripartite Convention on Work Excellence Through Joint Consultation* (Singapore: National Trade Union Congress, 1983).

<sup>116</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, "Making Singapore's Tripartism," 453.

<sup>117</sup> *Tripartite Convention*, 1.

issues covered in collective bargaining. As outlined in the convention, this meant that workers could not discuss improving their work environment in joint discussion talks because they were expected to “approach the process of joint consultation with a genuine desire to effect improvements for the common good, and not have narrow interests or further their own ends.”<sup>118</sup> In exchange for their support, workers were supposed to gain direct benefits in the form of secure employment, and indirect benefits from living in a Singapore with a stronger economy.<sup>119</sup> Adhering to this process of putting the nation first meant putting the PAP first, and doing so fit nicely into what the PAP thought was needed to push Singapore’s labor to the next level of productiveness for companies. Thus, the adoption and practice of joint consultation were manifestations of the PAP’s ideology of pragmatism.

Another aspect of the PAP’s labor management reform was the importation of Japanese management techniques. Despite Singapore’s negative recent experience of living under Japanese occupation during World War II, and like many before them, Singapore’s elites were inspired by Japanese economic success and hoped to emulate it back in their home country. In particular, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew kickstarted a “Learn from Japan” movement that sought to research Japanese ideas, study how they could be applied in Singapore, and implement them effectively. At a Singapore National Day Rally in 1980, Lee Kuan Yew delivered a speech in praise of Japan:

From my observations, reading, and experience, the nation most prepared for economic and political changes is Japan. Bereft of natural resources, the Japanese are well geared for the structural changes to their economy, to maintain their people’s well-being and their nation’s responsibility in the world... [besides

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<sup>118</sup> Stephan Lee, “Joint Consultation – a Management Perspective,” in *Tripartite Convention on Work Excellence Through Joint Consultation* (Singapore, National Trade Union Congress, 1983), 43.

<sup>119</sup> Lee, “Joint Consultation,” in *Tripartite Convention*, 41, 43.



security] in every other sector, they have rethought their problems and worked out new policies to meet challenging circumstances.”<sup>120</sup>

As seen in this observation, the most powerful man in Singapore was terribly impressed by Japan. He hoped that Singapore could learn from the Japanese to ensure that Singapore would be as prepared as Japan to weather the future and the ever-changing world economy.

To this end, the PAP invited a menagerie of Japanese advisors to inform Singaporeans about Japanese management techniques in order to replicate them in Singapore. This period of Japanese advising was influential, and many ideas were found and implemented.<sup>121</sup> Two of these ideas were organizing labor negotiations along industry lines and promoting much more training among Singapore’s workforce. In regards to organizing Tripartism along industry lines (labeled by some as enterprise or house unionism), the PAP pushed the NTUC, SNEF, and NWC to organize and negotiate by industry rather than to negotiate wages and benefits for the entire city-state.<sup>122</sup> This policy was implemented to bring about two key effects. Economically, it was hoped that this would create more efficient negotiations to foster more economic growth. Politically, the PAP hoped that by breaking up the NTUC into smaller parts, ambitious grassroots leaders such as Phey Yew Kok would be stymied in their quest to create an independent power base outside of the PAP’s hegemony.<sup>123</sup> In regards to the implementation of much more training for Singapore’s workers, the PAP found that on average Singaporean workers were trained far less than their Japanese counterparts. To rectify this, the PAP established a government- and employer-sponsored training fund, called the Skills Development Fund, to pay for worker

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<sup>120</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, “Singapore’s Vision for the 80s” (Singapore, August 17, 1980), in *The papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews, and Dialogues*, vol. 8., (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 476.

<sup>121</sup> Barr, “Trade Unions in an Elitist Society,” 485.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

education.<sup>124</sup> By further training Singapore's workforce, it was hoped that Singapore would be more adaptable to the quickly changing world economy and become more productive to attract further foreign direct investment.<sup>125</sup> In total, by selectively replicating Japanese techniques in Singapore, the PAP was effectively able to both increase Singapore's economic output and further expand its hegemonic control over Singapore's economy and society.

### ***Conclusion***

In a speech entitled, "Changing Attitude Towards Productivity," delivered in November 1984, Lee Kuan Yew highlighted the degree to which the PAP's hegemony had worked itself into the very psyche of Singaporean workers. He begins by relaying an anecdote. Typically, Lee said, he is bored when people return to Singapore after a number of years and remark on the physical build-up of the city state. What excites him, however, is when visitors notice the change in attitude of Singapore's workers. Lee related that an American businessman, upon returning to Singapore in 1982, six years after leaving in the early 1970s, noticed that the attitude of Singaporean workers had changed. Lee paraphrased the businessman's remarks:

The Singaporean is identifiable, he is confident. He has the will to preserve his stake and to improve upon what he has achieved. He understands that his future depends not only on his efforts, but also on those of others, that he has to work as a team to achieve the fullest for the team. He realizes that if it is every man for himself, the ceiling of his own achievement will be lower. In other words, the Singaporean is prepared for a productivity movement.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Sheldon, Gan, and Morgan, "Making Singapore's Tripartism," 450.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>126</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, "Changing Attitudes to Productivity" (Singapore, November 1, 1984), in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews, and Dialogues*, vol. 9 (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2012), 355.

Apocryphal or not, this speech contains an element of truth about how much the PAP had successfully convinced a large portion of Singapore's workers to believe in the party and its ideology of pragmatism: the PAP's pragmatic hegemony had worked into the fabric of Singapore's society, changing the outlook of Singapore's citizens.

The efforts of the PAP to achieve economic growth in the 1980s netted the PAP further control beyond the immense amount of sway it had already had over Singapore's society in the 1970s. The PAP was able to successfully convince labor to give up its "selfish" pursuits and actively support the party through the insertion of PAP technocrats into its leadership and through the steady hand of Ong Teng Cheong. Furthermore, the PAP was able to spread its hegemony to the previously untouchable employers' federations that held so much sway over Singapore's economy by creating the SNEF. And finally, the PAP changed Singapore's worker values by implementing joint consultation and replicating Japanese management techniques in Singaporean workplaces. The PAP efficiently spread its power throughout the society and economy of the city-state by convincing people that supporting the interests of the PAP was in the best interests of each other group. Significantly, the PAP spread its hegemony to such an extent that the largest political moves in Singapore occurred within the PAP apparatus as the party became the actively supported center of power in Singapore.

## **Conclusion: Implications of PAP Pragmatism as a Hegemony Beyond the 1980s**

### ***Summary of Thesis***

Since the PAP was elected to power in 1958, it has worked tirelessly to secure its position as Singapore's top political organization. As Kenneth Paul Tan points out, to expand its legitimacy as the rulers of a one-party state, the PAP sought to grow Singapore's economy while simultaneously quashing any alternate centers of power or Gramscian counter-hegemonies. Since 1958, the PAP has claimed to adhere to no specific ideology and instead to act pragmatically. However, as this paper has explored, acting pragmatically still requires judgment about what is pragmatic or not, and therein lie the political attitudes of the PAP. The PAP created policies that most efficiently promoted the power of the party and grew Singapore's economy. This includes the gradual creation of a PAP hegemony in Singapore by coercing and convincing groups in Singapore's society to follow the lead of party thought. By exploring the PAP's pragmatic trend towards establishing the rule of the party and promoting economic growth from 1958 to 1985, this paper explores how the relationship between the party, Singapore's labor force, and global capital reveals the ideological qualities of PAP pragmatism.

To begin this outline of the PAP's hegemonic growth, Chapter Two explores how the PAP persuaded Singapore's labor movement to accept its regime through violent suppression and appeals to post-colonial nationalism. Declassified documents from the British Foreign Office detail how the PAP, Malaysia, and the British Government worked together to label opposition parties in Singapore "communist" and then remove them from society. This allowed the PAP to conduct a quiet coup that removed any opposition from socialists and labor leaders in Singapore to secure its hold on power. Simultaneously, the PAP successfully cracked down on labor organizing and strikes by offering up a new post-colonial future for Singapore's workers. If

workers refused to follow along, their unions were deregistered and smashed. This is seen in the anecdotal struggles of Singapore's dockworkers and the quantifiable trends of union activity.

After this decolonization phase that saw the suppression of workers, Chapter Three details how the PAP was further able to effectively enforce its pragmatic ideology onto the leadership of the NTUC from 1965 to 1980 through three different policies. The PAP hosted a seminar that broadcasted its new idea of modernizing labor to the leadership of the NTUC. Additionally, the PAP began a joint union-PAP leadership policy that pushed PAP leadership into the ranks of NTUC leadership and put immense NTUC decision-making power into the hands of grassroots labor leaders. Finally, the PAP also established Tripartism in Singapore by creating various tripartite institutions such as the NWC that enabled the PAP much control over economic growth negotiations.

Finally in the 1980s, Chapter Four details how the PAP attempted to fix the modernization policies of the 1970s, which had failed to win over the entire population of Singapore to the PAP's ideology of pragmatism. The PAP co-opted the NTUC and successfully turned the organization into an extension of its hegemony by taking full control of its leadership positions. Beyond this, the PAP streamlined the economy of Singapore by combining Singapore's two employer associations into one group, the SNEF. Lastly, the PAP began to implement new labor management techniques. The PAP implemented joint consultation in its economy and promoted a myriad of Japanese economic techniques. In total, Chapter Four highlights how each of these policies had two crucial effects. Singapore's economy was improved and brought further under the control of the PAP by successfully convincing both labor and business to join the party's hegemony by actively supporting the PAP's leadership.

### ***Further Research and Final Words***

The analysis in this paper that furthers research done by Kenneth Paul Tan is limited in scope. In the mid-1980s, Singapore's workforce changed so drastically that an in-depth analysis is warranted to extend this paper's argument any further in time. Coinciding with the spread of neoliberal globalization, the number of guest workers in Singapore drastically increased starting in the mid-1980s. The process of importing labor began in the 1970s but picked up steam in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1970, there were 155,018 foreign manufacturing and construction workers in Singapore; in 1990 there were 556,300.<sup>127</sup> Then, going into the 2000s as Singapore's economy shifted towards the information economy and more women entered the workforce, the number of Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs) increased from 40,000 in 1988 to 200,000 in 2009. Most of these FDWs were Filipina maids.<sup>128</sup>

In June 2023, Singapore had a population of 5,917,600 people. Of this population, only 3,610,700 people were Singaporean citizens. The rest were 538,600 permanent residents and 1,768,400 non-residents.<sup>129</sup> The vast majority of non-residents are foreign guest workers. In general, guest workers do blue-collar jobs considered beneath the highly educated population of Singaporean citizens. Conversely, permanent residents do highly skilled work but can be laid off in lieu of Singaporean citizens if a financial downturn occurs. Considering this population breakdown, labor relations in contemporary Singapore are drastically different from relations in the mid-1980s and require an in-depth analysis to determine whether the story of increasing PAP hegemony over Singapore's workforce is applicable.

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<sup>127</sup> Dobbs, "Open or Bordered," 211.

<sup>128</sup> Slesh A. Shrestha and Dean Young, "Facilitating Worker Mobility: A Randomized Information Intervention among Migrant Workers in Singapore," *Economic Development & Cultural Change* 68, no. 1 (2019): 66.

<sup>129</sup> *Population in Brief 2023* (Singapore: Singapore Ministry of Manpower, 2023), 5.

To ground these numbers in reality, anecdotes from episode one, season ten of celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain's television series, *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*, are particularly useful. Taking place in 2017, the episode follows Bourdain as he speaks to a wide cross-section of Singapore's society and tries local dishes while exploring the attitudes of Singaporeans. Throughout the episode, Bourdain notices and points out how Singapore is a rules-based society and that the benchmark of success in Singapore is determined by one's career.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, when talking to a group of young urban professionals, Bourdain learns that there is a pervasive attitude of domestic laziness. Singaporeans consider themselves above doing tasks as fundamental as getting a cup of water or doing laundry because so many Singaporean households employ a Filipina maid. To this Bourdain jokingly states, "You know listening to you people, I gotta tell you, I want to join the Communist Party. It's like bourgeoisie, man. You're living off the labor of a repressed class. I'd start my own cell."<sup>131</sup> Similar to how Lee Kuan Yew highlighted the new confident attitude of Singapore's workers in his speech, "Changing Attitudes Towards Productivity," covered in Chapter Four, this episode highlights the new elitist attitude of Singapore's citizenry in 2017. Any further analysis of Singapore's changing labor relations would be loath to not address the extent to which the PAP's hegemonic ideology of pragmatism appears to have thoroughly engrained itself into the psyche of Singaporeans. Bourdain's conversations in this episode suggest that Singaporeans believe that the path of an authoritarian elite-guided economy, where success is measured by one's career, is the best path forward for Singapore.

The story of Singapore's labor relations from 1958 to 1985 answers one fundamental question: How do labor relations fit into the PAP's ideology of pragmatism? Labor relations in

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<sup>130</sup> Anthony Bourdain, "Singapore," in *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* (CNN, 2017).

<sup>131</sup> Bourdain, "Singapore," 14:30 to 16:50.

Singapore reveal that the PAP's two guiding political goals are economic growth and the continued dominance of the PAP. The journey to answer this question further answers the other research questions posed by this paper's argument. Furthermore, by answering these questions, this paper outlines what the Singapore Model entails when it comes to consequences for the lives of ordinary workers. Knowing the answer to this question is vital as nations across the globe move closer to authoritarian political models to promote domestic economic growth. To many developing nations, Singapore exists as a shining example of the positive aspects of an authoritarian economy, but Singapore, the shining city state in the Malacca Straits, used violence and coercive tactics to achieve such a venerated status. It is vital to understand the sacrifice of worker wellbeing and of personal freedom demanded by Singapore's Model of Economic Development.



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