NTUC to help PMEs get better representation in unions
By Saifulbahri Ismail | Posted: 04 March 2013 1752 hrs

SINGAPORE: The labour movement (NTUC) has started discussions with the government and employer groups to stretch the scope of representation of professionals, managers and executives (PMEs) in unions.

NTUC said this includes the possibility of amending the Industrial Relations Act to allow unions to represent both rank-and-file and white-collar workers.

NTUC said white-collar workers need to be better represented as their numbers continue to grow significantly.

PMEs currently form one third of the workforce.

By 2030, the government estimates this group could represent two thirds of the labour market as more Singaporeans become better educated.

The NTUC has seen an increasing number of PMEs being retrenched, and it wants more of these workers to be represented for work-related issues.

Currently, some unions offer PMEs limited representation, mainly in four areas -- negotiations for retrenchment benefits, breach of employment contracts, appeals against wrongful dismissal, and victimisation.

There are also executive-type unions that cater to PMEs.

But the labour movement sees the need to do more, as the number of local PMEs are increasing.

Patrick Tay, director of the legal and PME unit at NTUC, said: "The labour movement is calling on its tripartite partners and recently just started discussions to explore ways on how we can better represent and enlarge the scope of representation of PMEs.

"In particular, we are not just looking at forming more executive unions, but at the same time looking at how we can further stretch the scope for the rank-and-file unions in Singapore."

NTUC hopes to improve representation in areas such as re-employment of older PME workers.

Assistant Professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University believes it is important for the concept of representation to evolve with the changing needs of the economy.
He said: "It is also important to recognise that PMEs, even if they are better educated and in a far better position to negotiate their own terms, they are ultimately coming up against employers. Given that the workforce is changing, today's blue-collar workers would be tomorrow's PMEs."

Human resource practitioners said some employers may be uncomfortable with more PMEs being unionised.

Ronald Lee, managing director of PrimeStaff Management Services, said: "Why? Because number one, it will restrict their freedom of management -- the way they go about designing benefits and the way they decide to incentivise different categories of people. Obviously, they also want to be able to move in a way that the company should move, should the economic conditions change."

However, HR experts also think companies can benefit with more PMEs being unionised, as this makes it easier for employers to negotiate an agreement collectively rather than individually.

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