

Book Review:
Labour Management Relations in Singapore
Author: **Tan Chwee Huat**

Tan, C. H. (1995). *Labour Management Relations in Singapore*, Simon & Schuster, Singapore.

REVIEWED BY: WINSTON LEE

Labor Management Relations in Singapore is distinctive in that it is not just a book written for students studying a course in Industrial Relations for examination purposes. Rather, it is a book written in a style that makes Industrial Relations easily understandable and accessible to readers of any kind. From the opening of the first chapter, on Concepts and Definitions of Industrial Relations, to the last chapter on Wage Reform and Wage Negotiation, the author takes the reader through an interesting journey exploring the particular significance and value of Industrial Relations to the context of Singapore.

For those of us looking for good, locally written materials on Industrial Relations, this book is especially valuable. The book updates its readers on the changes and evolution of Industrial Relations practices that have taken place in Singapore from pre-independence days to the present. These dynamic changes occurring in commerce and industry as Singapore moves into the 21st century are enormous, and they have had an impact on labor-management relations. The book puts these changes into proper perspective and makes them understandable and more easily appreciated.

Many times, foreigners are perplexed about the "secret formulas" or "ingredients" that contribute to the success of Singapore's labour-management relations. Insights into many perplexing questions of this nature are given in the book. For example, in Chapter 2, Prof Tan succinctly provides an overview of the "Tripartite System" of Industrial Relations, which involves the Government, Employers and Union working hand in hand with one another. This model of tripartism, inspired by Dunlop's conceptual framework, has contributed significantly to the nurturing and building of a harmonious Industrial Relations climate unique to Singapore.

The book goes beyond the scope of just explaining trade unionism, collective bargaining and refining the work force structure in Singapore. Instead, the author helps the reader to understand the nature of Industrial Relations by focusing on key issues that illuminate important Labor-Management Relations decisions and policies. He shows how the formulation of such decisions and policies have an impact on human resource management and development in Singapore.

Part 1 of the book covers definitions, concepts and models relevant to labour-management relations; and the historical development and evolution of the tripartite system in Singapore. This serves as a foundation to understand the roles of the three agents on the local IR scene, i.e., the Government, Union and the Employers.

Part 2 of the book is an examination of both macro and micro issues. These issues include the rapidly changing and dynamic commercial and industrial environment, which affects the way labour-management relations operate in the Singaporean context. Key issues are Singapore's changing labour market and worker profile, its labour shortages, automation and skills training, etc. These areas have always been a major concern of the government, trade unionists and employers and they are discussed fully in Chapters 3 and 4.

Then, Part 3 of the book explores the orientations and unique contributions of the different parties involved in Tripartism. What is illuminating are the objectives and roles of trade unions, the

National Trade Union Congress, the Singapore National Employers Federation, and other employer organisations and professional bodies. Of great significance are Chapters 7 and 8. These chapters discuss the contributions made by the Singapore Government in effecting labour laws; and the establishment and roles of the Ministry of Labour and the Industrial Arbitration Court in regulating the conduct of employment and the resolution of industrial disputes.

Professor Tan analyses the objectives, roles and social contributions of these institutions, and examines how they interact and collaborate with each other, and how this collaboration leads to stable labour - management relations. These efforts and the spirit of mutual acceptance and co-operation contributed significantly to the progress of the labour movement after Singapore's independence.

No book on Singaporean Industrial Relations would be complete without examining issues which could give rise to tension and possible antagonism: e.g., collective bargaining, wage reform and wage negotiation. These topics are analysed and critiqued in the final two chapters of the book, which form Part 4.

In terms of style, the presentation format of each chapter makes the book user-friendly to its readers. Each chapter opens with Learning Objectives and ends with a summary of the key points covered in the chapter. The book provides in each chapter key terms to reinforce learning, questions to stimulate further learning, and a list of useful references for further research.

Overall, this book's strength lies in the author's ability to take otherwise dry, conservative academic concepts and weave them into a tapestry of great interest. Facts, concepts and ideas are presented clearly, unambiguously and interestingly. This makes the book a valued reference not only for students, but also for practitioners. HR managers, trade unionists and public administrators who desire to acquire a deeper knowledge of the IR system and ethos in Singapore will find this book to be a worthwhile addition to their professional library.

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