

# A 'god in the labour movement' who fell to earth

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HE WAS a rising star in the People's Action Party (PAP) in the 1970s, a second-term MP for Boon Teck who headed the labour movement and three of its most influential unions.

But the man once described as a "god in the labour movement" by a subordinate may not have been immune to mortal temptations.

Ten years after becoming president of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) in 1970 at the youthful age of 35, Phey Yew Kok was charged in December 1979 with misusing more than \$100,000 in union funds and investing union money in a private supermarket without approval.

His sensational fall from grace was matched only by the shocking news of him jumping bail in January 1980. It caused his two bailors to forfeit \$95,000 of the \$100,000 they had put up.

When Phey failed to show up in court on Jan 7, officers from the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) were sent to keep a 24-hour watch on his house in Lorong Ong Lye off Upper Paya Lebar Road, his office and other places he frequented.

A warrant was obtained for his arrest and Interpol was alerted to look out for Phey, who was last seen in a "very emotional and upset state" at home on Dec 31, 1979, by his wife and lawyer.

His passports were cancelled, but not before he had left Singapore by train for Kuala Lumpur and then Bangkok, where the CPIB lost his trail. Some reports later placed him in Taiwan.

After his escape, Phey was dismissed as NTUC chairman – his role had changed in May 1979 – and secretary-general of the Singapore Industrial Labour Organisation (Silo) and the Pioneer Industries Employees Union (PIEU).

He had resigned from the three top posts in December before going missing, but his resignation was put on hold on the recommendation of his mentor Devan Nair, who was also NTUC president.

The Singapore Air Transport Workers' Union (Satu), a third un-

ion run by Phey, also dismissed him as its secretary-general in 1980. Less than two years later, members of both Silo and PIEU voted to wind up the huge omnibus unions.

It was a sad end to the stellar career of Phey, now 81, a former primary school teacher from a Teochew family in Pontian, Johor.

In 1964, he became an industrial relations officer with the NTUC while working as an accounts clerk at Malaysia-Singapore Airlines, the predecessor of Singapore Airlines. He joined Satu and was named treasurer of the 10,500-strong union in 1966.

After displaying good organisational and fund-raising skills – as well as a crucial proficiency in Mandarin that allowed him to communicate with blue-collar workers – Phey was made Satu president within a few years.

In 1970, he headed Silo and PIEU – which together had about 80,000 workers – plus NTUC.

With the dispute-prone workers in Jurong, Phey was "very successful in his own quiet way", recalled former president and unionist S R Nathan in his memoirs.

Under his leadership, Silo and PIEU "developed a reach well beyond the expectations of earlier NTUC leaders", Mr Nathan added. Silo went from 5,300 members in 1970 to 60,000 by 1979.

But Phey's success was not without pitfalls. While some knew him as a humble, honest and friendly man who championed the ordinary worker, others saw him as ambitious and arrogant.

In 1970, he was attacked twice by hired thugs and left with a 7.5cm scar on his face after being slashed by a razor.

Still, he went on to become a PAP MP for Boon Teck, a seat he won in 1972 and again in 1976.

By then, Phey had become a high-profile union spokesman who, among other things, urged employers to extend the retirement age from 55 to 60 and campaigned for better wages and welfare for workers.

By 1978, he was also controlling the largest collection of NTUC-related cooperative ventures, including 19 supermarkets, an import and export division and

## From rising star to fugitive

**1970** Phey Yew Kok is appointed president of National Trades Union Congress (NTUC).

**1972** Elected MP for Boon Teck constituency (below).

**1979** **May:** Appointed NTUC chairman. Some time in the middle of the year, Phey is investigated for corruption.

**Dec 1:** He is arrested, and charged with criminal breach of trust and other offences under the Trade Unions Act. Around \$100,000 of union funds is involved. Phey pleads not guilty and is released on bail of \$100,000.

**Dec 31:** Unknown to the authorities, Phey leaves for Kuala Lumpur on a train. He later moves on to Bangkok, where he disappears.

**1980** **Jan 7:** Phey fails to turn up in court. A warrant for his arrest is issued and his home put under surveillance. Interpol is alerted and his passports are cancelled.

**1989** **March:** Minister for Home Affairs S. Jayakumar tells Parliament that all possible measures to trace Phey were taken. He reveals that the Thai authorities raided the premises where Phey was suspected to be staying. He added that there was no period of limitation on the offences.

**1998** **March:** Minister of State for Home Affairs Ho Peng Kee tells Parliament that Phey remains on Interpol's wanted list, but efforts to track him depend on intelligence.

**2015** **June 22:** At the age of 81, Phey surrenders at the Singapore Embassy in Bangkok. The next day, he is escorted back to Singapore.

**June 24:** He is read the same charges he faced in 1979. He is placed on remand and a pre-trial conference has been fixed for July 23.

ST FILE PHOTO



even the Big Splash water park.

Many thought he would go on to greater heights in the Government. Instead, his alleged criminal breach of trust and subsequent flight from justice became a political issue, not least because he was Mr Nair's protege. A friend of his told The Straits

Times in 1980 that "to Devan, he could do no wrong".

The Phey affair was later cited, in a 1988 White Paper on Mr Nair's resignation as president, as the first of three occasions of Mr Nair's alcoholic tendencies.

Opposition politicians used the Phey case to argue that the PAP

had questionable judgment of character and did not do enough to track him down, with opposition veteran J.B. Jeyaretnam even implying there was a cover-up.

In turn, PAP leaders pointed to Phey as proof that the ruling party would not shy from investigating any corruption, even if it involved

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FOR CORRUPTION

We have maintained a clean and non-corrupt system in Singapore for half a century because we have zero tolerance for corruption.

When we discover wrongdoing, we do not hesitate to act. We will not allow any cover-up, even when it is awkward or embarrassing for the Government.

Perhaps not many of you remember Phey Yew Kok. He was a PAP MP and senior union leader.

In 1979, he was charged with criminal breach of trust and misuse of union funds.

The following year, he absconded while on bail and became a fugitive from justice.

Two days ago, Phey turned himself in at our Embassy in Bangkok, and today he returned to Singapore. Phey was charged in court this afternoon, and the law will have to take its course.

– PM Lee Hsien Loong's post on his Facebook page yesterday

a high-profile party member.

"All that needs to be done was done," said then Home Affairs Minister S. Jayakumar in Parliament in 1989. "There is still a warrant of arrest for him and there is no period of limitation on his offence."

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