In his speech at this year’s May Day Rally on 1 May 2013, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong identified three important factors needed to grow the economy: “First, we need to attract quality investment, create better jobs; secondly, we need to raise productivity, restructure the domestic economy; and thirdly, we must invest in our future, in our people.”

PM Lee stressed that underpinning a robust economy is strong tripartism and that all parties must do their part to strengthen it. This includes strong unions and union leaders who help workers while building constructive relations with the other tripartite partners.

He added that employers have to be responsible and successful as otherwise they can’t help workers. PM Lee also emphasised that a pro-labour and pro-Singaporean Government is needed to protect workers’ interests, foster growth and make sure that everyone benefits from prosperity:

“That is what our tripartite partnership has always been about. We must strengthen the trust and understanding that underpin this relationship. We have built it up over many years of shared sacrifice and toil. Let us strengthen it, never lose it, this is our treasure which keeps us safe and strong and ahead.”

Over at the May Day Dinner on 28 April 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean spoke on the need to take care of the increasing numbers of PMEs (Professionals, Managers and Executives) in the workforce. He said: “I understand that our tripartite partners do recognise the need for our unions to progressively represent more PMEs, while at the same time bearing in mind that employers also need sufficient flexibility to manage their human resources. A tripartite work group has been studying this issue closely.

“The Government looks forward to receiving their joint proposal. With our constructive approach towards tripartism, I believe it is possible to achieve a win-win arrangement for the PMEs, unions and management.”

With the growing pool of older experienced workers, he also encouraged companies to tap on the new WorkPro scheme to encourage more mature workers and back-to-work Singaporeans to enter the workforce.

National Wages Council (NWC) Chairman Professor Lim Pin announced that the focus in NWC’s recommendations for 2013/2014 is on raising real wages for workers by improving productivity and higher wages for low-wage workers.

The Council recommends that real wage increases should be in line with productivity growth over the long term. Companies should take concerted steps to tap on the Quality Growth Programme and approach restructuring with greater urgency. With improvement in productivity, the NWC also urges employers to share productivity gains fairly with their workers in a sustainable manner.

“The second area that the NWC wanted to focus on was on the low-wage workers, given that they are a vulnerable group whose income growth has lagged the rest of the workforce,” said Professor Lim Pin.

The NWC recommends that companies grant these workers a built-in wage increase in the form of a dollar quantum and a percentage. To help these workers better cope with the cost of living, companies that are doing well are recommended to grant an additional one-off lump sum payment.

In particular, the Council recommends that companies employing workers earning a basic monthly salary of up to $1,000 grant them a built-in wage increase of at least $60.

The NWC further calls on the employers and service buyers in industries where outsourcing practices are widespread to make a special effort to uplift the pay of the low-wage workers and incorporate the NWC wage recommendations into the outsourced service contracts.

Buyers of outsourced services should also factor the annual wage adjustments for the workers into their contracts, or allow for contract values to be adjusted accordingly.
A new initiative called WorkPro was introduced when Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam delivered the Budget Speech on 25 April 2013. WorkPro is an enhancement and consolidation of the Work-Life Works! (WoW! Fund), Flexi-Works! and the ADVANTAGE! Scheme companies can tap on to improve work-life harmony and also to provide a holistic support to help employers hire and retain back to work locals and mature workers.

It is a tripartite programme jointly developed by the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) and the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) to encourage the adoption of flexible work arrangements, job redesign and support the employment of mature workers and back-to-work locals.

It will be a one-stop programme to help employers to improve work-life harmony, and to recruit and retain mature workers and back-to-work locals to meet their manpower needs.

Companies who wish to tap on WorkPro can call WDAs Hotline at 6883 5885 or email WDA_Enquiry@wda.gov.sg for more information. SMEs can also approach the SME Centres.

There was much to discuss at the Singapore Tripartism Forum on 11 April 2013 involving union leaders, management partners and Government representatives. Moderated by NTUC President Diana Chia, the dialogue session with panelists Acting Minister for Manpower Tan Chuan-Jin, NTUC President Diana Chia and SNEF President Stephen Lee touched on topics of current interest and concern.

This included foreign workers, maintaining a Singaporean Core in the workforce, and the Progressive Wage Model versus a minimum wage scheme. With healthier lifestyles, longer life spans and an ageing population, extending the retirement age to 67 years was also actively discussed.

Mr Lim said: “We are pushing very hard on increasing the retirement age. We think it is a good time to do so as the labour market is tight. And the ageing population is going to be one of the biggest challenges facing all of us. This is one reason why we are quite excited that one of the key thrusts of the recently announced WorkPro is to make the workplace more age-friendly.”

Mr Lee said that clearly while “workers’ capability to work longer is actually there”, the change in pushing the retirement age to 67 years “will not be right away.”

Mr Tan spoke of the importance to the workforce in Singapore.

Mr Tan said, “I believe that being fair, responsible and inclusive is the correct thing to do. Many say that people are their most important resource, hence how we nurture and treat our people must reflect that sense of value.”

Mr Tan also shared his personalised Fair@Work Promise, and encouraged the audience to make their individual commitments via the Fair@Work Promise Facebook app.

Keynote speaker, Dr Sondra Thiederman, President of Cross-Cultural Communications, a San Diego based training firm, shared valuable insights on key trends and implications of diversity and inclusion. Dr Thiederman also explained the use of tools and proactive approaches to help organisations understand and reduce unconscious bias in the workplace.

TAFEP also released the findings from two research studies which demonstrated the value of mature workers and the factors behind the career progression of senior women leaders.