

Labour shortage may hurt maritime sector

Minister of State proposes more training, skills upgrading

By **LYNETTE KHOO**

THE booming economy has caused various industries here to find recruiting difficult, and now the maritime sector is feeling the heat as well.

NTUC deputy secretary-general and Minister of State for Health Heng Chee How, who gave an opening speech at the fourth Maritime Manpower Singapore conference yesterday, said the manpower shortage could hold the industry back.

"If more could be done to increase intake, reduce leakage and upgrade the capability of the workforce, the industry will be able to seize the opportunities and grow. On the other hand, this growing deficit, if left unchecked or inadequately addressed, would hurt growth and prospects," Mr Heng said.

While the increase in size and sophistication of the world's fleet at a time of

rising demand for global transport is allowing their seafaring crew to command higher wages, there also emerges an urgent need to train crews to work on board more sophisticated vessels.

According to estimates from BIMCO/ISF, there will be a shortfall of 27,000 officers by the year 2015. Within this deficit, the shortage of seafaring officers will be most acute for very specialised ships like liquefied gas carriers and chemical tankers.

Reflecting the urgency of this problem, the conference, themed as "Crewing Crisis - A call for action", saw speakers from marine companies and associations worldwide providing updates on their countries as well as exploring practical solutions to the manpower issue.

Singapore's marine industry, seen as a "sunset industry" a couple of decades ago, is now a highly competitive and technologically advanced industry as a world player in the niche rig-building business.

In calling for practical ways to tackle the issue, Mr

Heng proposed a two-pronged strategy - training and skills development, and collaborative efforts to attract and retain suitable manpower.

He gave the example of the collaboration between the Association of Singapore Marine Industries (ASMI), the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) and the NTUC, to jointly develop the ASMI Super V programme, which provides a combination of training, placement, skills upgrading and career development, together with funding incentives for training and job redesign.

From 2006 to the end of July this year, 87 trainees have gone through this programme and have taken up posts ranging from charge-hand to higher supervisory positions.

But Mr Heng said more could be done to address the labour shortage. He urged shipowners and ship-managers to invest in the training and upgrading of the skills of seafarers sailing on their ships, rather than leaving the training to someone else while they themselves merely poached trained crew members.

On top of that, they may pool their resources and invest in training infrastructure collectively, he said.

"One of the speakers mentioned that there is never a good time to train and I think it's a very wise observation. You will typically find that when there are orders to be filled, companies and workers are focused on training, but when times are bad, the money is not (available) for training," Mr Heng said.

"Yet we all know, unless we train in good times and bad, we will never have that skilled manpower pool to draw from."

Among other suggestions put forward at the conference yesterday, the Singapore Maritime Officers' Union (SMOU) general secretary Thomas Tay proposed a collaborative tripartite training between the government, SMOU and shipowners, which may involve investing in training collectively.

The first tripartite product took the form of the CadetsPlus programme that has been developed jointly by the employers, the Singapore Maritime Academy



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Mr Heng: 'Unless we train in good times and bad, we will never have that skilled manpower pool to draw from.'

and the union, using the Singapore Maritime Training Fund.

The programme is a pre-sea preparatory course that comprises course modules as well as military and drill training. Its first cohort of cadets that is currently undergoing the CadetsPlus programme in Qingdao, China, will be graduating on Sept 14.

To ensure sustainable wage rises in tandem with the value of the job, rather than experience boom-bust

conditions, Mr Heng urged industry players to engage in continuous training.

"It is important that we continue to train and develop the manpower that we have because having a strong pool of skilled manpower is the fundamental solution to manpower requirements," Mr Heng said. "Otherwise, it's a zero-sum game. You drive up the costs that may not be sustainable and that will eventually hit businesses as well as workers in terms of their job."