

Phey Yew Kok in court after 35 years on the run

Ex-MP and unionist gave himself up in Bangkok, faces CBT charges here

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AFTER more than three decades on the run since being accused of criminal breach of trust (CBT), former MP Phey Yew Kok, who was once one of Singapore's most powerful unionists, has come out of hiding.

On Monday, he gave himself up at the Singapore Embassy in Bangkok after 35 years as a fugitive. And yesterday, at the age of 81, a silver-haired Phey again found himself in a Singapore court where he heard the six charges involving \$100,000 of union funds - charges first read to him on Dec 10, 1979.

That was just weeks before the former president of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) jumped bail, took a train to Kuala Lumpur and evaded attempts to track him down in Thailand.

He has been on Interpol's wanted list since, longer than any other Singaporean, it is believed.

Those who knew and worked with him told The Straits Times they could not fathom why he chose to abscond, and were just as puzzled at why he chose to surrender now. Two of his sons declined to comment last night.

But Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in a statement that he hopes this will "bring closure to a longstanding case involving a person who was holding public office as an MP and a senior union leader", a point shared by NTUC.

In a Facebook post yesterday, PM Lee also said that the attempts to bring Phey to justice showed Singapore's zero tolerance for corruption. "We will not

allow any cover-up, even when it is awkward or embarrassing for the Government."

Phey had a phenomenal rise after becoming an industrial relations officer with NTUC in 1964.

In 1970, at just 35, he was picked to head NTUC, as well as the Singapore Industrial Labour Organisation (Silo) and the Pioneer Industries Employees' Union (PIEU). Two years later, he was elected MP for Boon Teck on a People's Action Party ticket.

But soon after taking on the role of NTUC chairman in 1979, he was investigated and, by the year end, was facing serious charges, four of which involved CBT.

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These include having misappropriated a \$40,000 and a \$25,000 cheque in 1975 while he

was Silo general secretary.

In September 1978, he allegedly used \$18,000 of Silo's funds to buy shares of Forward Supermarket without ministerial approval - breaching the Trade Unions Act.

If found guilty of CBT, Phey faces up to seven years in jail along with a fine. Deputy Public Prosecutor Tan Kiat Pheng, who asked that he be remanded at Changi Prison for four weeks, said more charges may be brought.

Clad in a white shirt and khaki trousers, Phey spoke before being told by District Judge Eddy Tham that there was no need to go into details of the charges for now.

"Your Honour, can excuse me?" Phey, whose case has been fixed for a pre-trial conference on July 23, said. "I speak a bit louder because my hearing is very bad. If my memory still does not fail me, I don't think the money was transferred to my personal account."

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Phey Yew Kok in a photo taken on Dec 3, 1979, days before he had his charges read to him in court on Dec 10. He then went on the run on Dec 31, 1979. FILE PHOTO

Phey's fall from grace

- **1970:** Appointed National Trades Union Congress president at the age of 35.
- **1972:** Elected MP for Boon Teck constituency.
- **DEC 10, 1979:** Charged with misusing over \$100,000 in

- union funds and investing union money in a private supermarket without approval.
- **DEC 31, 1979:** Leaves for Kuala Lumpur, then moves on to Bangkok, where he disappears.