

Don't go out of line, Dr M warns unions

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By AHMAD A. TALIB

THE Prime Minister acknowledged yesterday that government employees can, through their trade unions, exercise their right to take militant industrial action, but warned them to be "very careful" with whatever they plan to do to back their demands for higher wages and better benefits.

The government will continue to monitor very closely the unions' moves, and will only take counter action if the unions step out of line. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad assured the unions, led by Cuepacs and the National Joint Councils (Staff Side), that the government will act very much within the law.

Dr Mahathir was answering newsmen's queries at the end of Umno's 36th annual general as-

sembly at the Umno Complex in Kuala Lumpur. The wage claims by civil servants featured prominently during the assembly where Cuepacs president Ahmad Nor was severely criticised.

Dr Mahathir also referred to the claims when he wound up the debate on the final day of the three-day assembly. He told delegates earlier in the morning that the government will not be moved from its firm position of not wanting to negotiate with the unions while under threat, and that even if negotiations are held, there will be no promises to the unions.

The stage now appears set for a head-on confrontation between the government and the unions. This, the Prime Minister said, will not be of the government's making but that of the unions. The vo-

latile situation can be defused if the unions cease their threat of militant action.

He remained hopeful that good sense will prevail as the planned actions (which begin today with off office-hours picketing by members of the Malayan Technical Services Union) will only undermine the country's political and economic stability.

He said: "The unions have the right to strike, as much as the government has the right to take whatever measures to ease the situation. But whatever action we take will be within the law. The unions have to be very careful that their actions do not exceed their rights."

His firm statements during the assembly had apparently sent shivers down the spine of some

trade unionists in government service. While Encik Ahmad still maintains a tough stance, others seem to have second thoughts about picketing and striking.

The picketing planned will be a good gauge of how supportive union members are towards the union leadership. The MTSU staged a rally in Ipoh yesterday explaining its reasons for wanting to take strike action to pursue the cause of junior technicians and technicians.

Dr Mahathir said industrial threats will scare away both foreign and local investors and this will mean less revenue and no job opportunities. This will also mean less chance of employment for workers who have had their services terminated by com-

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panies badly affected by the downturn in business activities.

He dismissed criticisms by some unions that the government is a "cold employer." How can this be when the government, despite severe financial difficulties, has not retrenched any single employee, he asked. While the government has reduced some subsidies to certain sectors, it has not touched the allowances extended to

its employees, he added.

"What else do government employees want? We have the best pension scheme in this region; our allowances speak for themselves. Do the unions want us now to reduce our assistance to the fishermen and the farmers so that we can help them, even when they already enjoy a fixed monthly income, as against the farmers and fishermen?" the Prime Minister asked to the applause of the delegates.