

Joint committee to be set up PM agrees to wage claim talks

By **SABRY SHARIF**

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. — The Prime Minister has agreed to negotiations with Cuepacs and the five NJCs (Staff Side) over the year-old wage claims dispute.

A joint committee comprising representatives of the Government and Cuepacs and the five NJCs (Staff Side) is to be set up shortly to prepare for the talks.

Although the strike threat by Cuepacs and the five NJCs (Staff Side), scheduled for Jan 15 was not mentioned, it is, nevertheless, understood the new developments would lead to its withdrawal.

The action committee of the five NJCs (Staff Side) will meet soon to decide on this while the Congress Council of Cuepacs will convene this Sunday for the same issue.

This turn of events in the long-drawn dispute came about following an hour-long meeting this evening between Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and union officials at the Prime Minister's Department.

Cuepacs and the five NJCs (Staff Side) were represented by a 29-member delegation led by its president and co-ordinating chairman Ahmad Nor.

Also present were Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin, Education Minister Datuk Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Khalil Yaakob, the Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Sallehuddin Mohamed and the Director-General of the Public Services Department, Tan Sri Rozhan Kuntom.

Elaborating on the discussions with the Prime Minister, Encik Ahmad told the Press after the meeting the negotiations would be

June 12 pay offer accepted as interim revision

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based on a six-point memorandum of claims submitted to Dr Mahathir today.

He said that in accepting the memorandum, the Prime Minister said it would form the basis of talks with the joint committee which he would chair.

The Government has also agreed to Cuepacs' request that the June 12 pay offer to civil servants in Groups C and D and the lower grades in the Armed Forces and the Police be considered as an interim general salary revision, he added.

He said the Prime Minister, in addition, gave an assurance that the 870,000 civil servants would be given a general salary revision, estimated to cost \$1.5 billion, when the economy improved. However, the timeframe would be determined by the joint committee.

Encik Ahmad said the Prime Minister's acceptance of the June 12 pay offer as an interim general salary revision was a "major achievement" for civil servants as it topped the list in the memorandum.

In view of this, Cuepacs accepted the Government's explanation that it did not have the funds just now to meet any salary demands.

The Cuepacs president also said Dr Mahathir did not specify any timeframe for a general salary revision. Neither did he state that it would be backdated to any specific date. Both these issues were the second point in the memorandum.

However, he (Encik Ahmad) was optimistic this was a matter that could be negotiated by the joint committee.

The other four points in the memorandum and accepted for negotiations are:

- **TAX** exemption and personal relief for civil servants so their salary adjustments will not be affected. They also want all fixed allowances such as the civil service allowance exempted from tax.

- **HIGHER** civil service allowance to help Government workers overcome the problem of housing and rental payments which on the average take up about half of the employers' salaries.

- **A MINIMUM** annual increment of \$20 or five per cent of the salary drawn, whichever is higher; and

- **ANNUAL** salary adjustments based on the yearly cost of living increase.

Concession

Another major concession obtained today, said Encik Ahmad, was the Prime Minister's approval for the five NJCs (Staff Side) to merge into one entity. Accordingly, the relevant circular related to the establishment of the five NJCs would be rescinded at the appropriate time.

"This is a major achievement and very significant in that it means the Government is giving due recognition to the rights of the workers," the Cuepacs chief said.

Encik Ahmad said he was "very satisfied" with the meeting today, especially the "new approach adopted by the Prime Minister" which he felt eliminated whatever "strained relationship" between the public sector unions and the Government that had been lingering after last Tuesday's developments.

Last Tuesday was the first major positive development in the wage claims dispute.

On that day, the Prime Minister gave a letter to

Encik Ahmad via Encik Daim informing him that he (Dr Mahathir) was ready to meet Cuepacs and the five NJCs (Staff Side) on the civil servants' pay claims which resulted in Cuepacs and the five NJCs cancelling their nation-wide picket scheduled for the next day.

But there was still some doubts among union officials on whether the meeting would indeed lead to negotiations on the wage claims of the civil servants.

The Cuepacs chief said details as to the exact composition of the joint committee would be worked out soon.

Cuepacs has suggested that either the Chief Secretary to the Government or the Director-General of the PSD act as the chief co-ordinator of the joint committee.

Encik Ahmad said the Prime Minister said that having sorted out the preliminaries, the joint committee should meet at least once in four months to get down to the more serious business of the claims.

However, this did not mean that the first meeting would be four months from now. The first meeting of the joint committee is expected to be convened before mid-November.

On the overall mood that prevailed at today's meeting, Encik Ahmad said the Prime Minister was in a jovial mood and the discussions were frank as much as they were forthright and friendly.

"Above all, there was genuine appreciation of the problems of civil servants and concern on the part of the Government for their welfare.

"It was also a demonstration that the Government and the workers are partners in the management of the administration," he added.