

PM: We will not forsake workers

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. -The Government will not forsake the legitimate interests of workers in the overall pursuit of national development, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

While this stand may be uppermost in the Government's labour policy, it will not compromise on industrial relations issues which may affect the national economy, the Prime Minister added.

This was conveyed by the Prime Minister to key officials of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress today in his first meeting with them.

He said he was satisfied with the meeting because the Government's stand on several labour issues was clearly explained.

The Government and labour leaders may have different views on labour issues but the Government's overriding concern was for rapid economic growth leading to better wages, Dr Mahathir told reporters after the 2½-hour meeting.

He reminded the MTUC that the Government had, to waive certain prerequisites of the New Economic Policy to attract foreign investments to ensure higher employment which indirectly helped unions increase their membership.

He said: "It is impossible to ignore our responsibility to workers (but) we will not give in to issues that cannot be compromised. We are doing this for the good of workers.

"The Government does not exploit workers, simply because it needs their continued support to stay in power.

"In a democracy, we need the support of the majority who are the workers. We cannot depend just on employers for votes."

The MTUC was led by its president, Encik Zainal Rampak. Also present were deputy president Ahmad Nor, secretary-general Dr V. David, deputy secretary-general G. Rajasekaran and 10 other officials.

Labour Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek and Labour Ministry Secretary-General Nik Mohamed Amin Nik Bakar also attended the meeting.

The MTUC submitted a 12-page memorandum outlining industrial relations issues covering labour laws, bargaining rights for civil servants and a proposal for a national union for electronics industry workers.

Dr Mahathir told the MTUC leaders that in countries like South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, better wages were not a result of industrial action but due to rapid economic development.

He said these workers were once paid lower than Malaysian workers but now earned about \$1,000 a

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month, more than the average Malaysian worker.

Such prosperity helps ensure industrial harmony and attracts investors.

Dr Mahathir reiterated his earlier calls that politicians should not lead trade unions.

He chided a certain MTUC leader for his repeated calls to have Malaysia excluded from the US Generalised System of Preference duty-cuts privileges.

The MTUC's request for bargaining rights for civil servants cannot be entertained because it can create unhealthy industrial relations.

He said a national union for electronics industry workers would not be feasible because this might compel all electronics companies to offer across-the-board terms and conditions of service which might be impossible for some.

He also told the MTUC officials that the National Labour Advisory Council could not be turned into a decision-making body. It is the Government and employers that will be held responsible for decisions made, not the workers' side in the tripartite body.

Dr Mahathir regretted that the MTUC had the impression that the Government, particularly him, was behind the formation of the Malaysian Labour Organisation.

The MTUC had issued circulars to this effect at its special general council meeting last week.

"The Government's policy in the matter is, one of non-interference. I regret that such an accusation persisted. It is up to the workers and the law to determine whether the MLO will be registered."