

'Only economic growth can ensure well-being of workers'

Rethink your roles, PM urges unions

BY NOR HAWA YUNUS

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. — The freedom to form trade unions and to take industrial action will not necessarily benefit workers. Similarly, the stand that employers are the enemies of the workers, and therefore must be opposed, will not guarantee the well-being of the workers.

On the contrary, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the well-being of the workers could only be improved and safeguarded by accelerating economic growth.

This was the case with the four Asian NICs (newly industrialised countries — Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong). Their workers received better pay not because of trade union militancy but because of rapid economic growth.

The Prime Minister urged the Malaysian trade union movement to rethink and redefine their roles as the protectors of workers.

more likely to succeed and to be able to provide better terms and conditions of service to the employees.

The Government firmly believed that the workers and the unemployed could only benefit through a rapidly expanding economy.

"We believe that if our economy expands, our workers will enjoy better benefits as a matter of course. If trade unions and their members cooperate by working hard to increase productivity, the nation's economy will grow faster.

"This will automatically improve wages like in the NICs and Japan."

The Prime Minister said the world had seen enough of trade unions acting as pressure groups using various means to try and achieve their targets in the last 100 years.

"But times have changed. Employers are no longer the greedy lot out to exploit workers. Employers provide jobs, contribute to pension funds, take care of welfare and recreational facilities. If they exploit their workers, there are laws which deal with them."

He reiterated a statement he had made after a meeting with MTUC leaders on Wednesday that the Government would not turn its back on workers. In a democratic

Dr Mahathir gave this advice when opening the three-day triennial delegates' conference of the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Service (Cuepacs) which began here today.

He also posed several questions for the delegates' consideration.

Can workers' living standards be improved merely by taking a confrontational attitude, to be followed by industrial action? he asked.

The Prime Minister also asked trade unions whether it was better for them to work towards helping to increase workers' productivity, adding that productive industries were

country and where the number of workers far exceeded that of employers, it would be suicidal for the Government to forsake the interest of workers. It needed their support.

But, said the Prime Minister, if the Government appeared to be responding more to the needs of investors and employers, it was only because it had the interest of workers at heart, particularly in wanting to provide new job opportunities.

Dr Mahathir said there was a lot to be learnt from the success of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong

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Kong and Singapore. Within three decades they had succeeded in becoming rich nations.

He said workers in these countries once earned lower wages than their Malaysian counterparts. But today, they earn three times higher than the 11,000 a month average for Malaysian workers.

What was astonishing, said the Prime Minister, was the increase in wages was not the result of trade union demands. On the contrary, there was almost no effective trade unions in these countries. Strikes and other forms of industrial actions were not known until very recently.

"Maybe, there are those who say that the workers there are not free. But in truth they earn more and are better off than workers who are said to be free.

"What is the meaning of freedom if it does not bring good results. In Malaysia, the workers are free, but their progress is not like those in the NICs."

Dr Mahathir warned local trade unionists of the devious intentions of Western trade unionists who harped on the freedom of workers. In most cases, he said, they were not interested in defending workers in developing countries.

Instead, they wanted to see industrial peace in developing countries disrupted so that products of the developing nations could not compete with theirs.

"If they really sympathise with workers in the developing nations, they will help these countries market their products successfully in rich nations. Instead, they press for barriers to be imposed on our products and for the withdrawal of the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) benefits."