

# Adopt new goals, PM tells unions

By AHIRUDIN ATTAN

OUTLINING the roles of labour in the 1990s, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday trade unions need to take their concerns beyond the mundane bread and butter issues.

"The time has come for trade unions to consider and adopt new objectives," he said when opening the 19th Convention of the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (Cuopacs) in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Stressing the importance of these roles in helping put the country firmly on the road towards the year 2020, Dr Mahathir suggested that trade unions focus their attention on maintaining and improving industrial rela-

tions as well as elevating the status of workers in all aspects.

In line with change and progress, he said, it is fitting that trade unions shift their main focus on upgrading the status of workers, not just in terms of salaries and terms of employment, but also in terms of their social advancement and the way they think.

"Trade unions should educate their members on issues related to the economy, productivity, quality, consumerism and the environment. We do not want our workers to lag behind other workers in grasping these issues.

"Issues related to the environment, the market economy and consumerism, for instance, are going to be of more importance in the 1990s

and will influence the development and progress of a nation striving to attain industrialised status," he said.

The Prime Minister's address was read by Human Resources Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek. Some 500 guests, including union leaders affiliated to the congress, private sector representatives, former Cuepacs chiefs and leaders from the Malaysian Labour Organisation (MLO), attended the opening of the three-day convention.

Leaders from the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) were notable absentees at the opening ceremony, underlining the growing rift between Cuepacs and the MLO, on the one side, and the largest trade union centre, on the other.

This rift stemmed from

the MTUC leaders' confrontational tactics and active political involvement, trends which Dr Mahathir said serve the interests of these leaders but not that of the workers.

The Prime Minister said trade union leaders must be responsible, harbour no vested interests and be free from any political influence.

"I am saddened, therefore, to see that there is a small group of union leaders who are irresponsible, who place personal interest above that of the workers and who are willing to bad-mouth the Government and the nation as long as their personal and political ambitions are realised.

"These leaders could not care less if their actions at international labour forums jeopardise the country's eco-

nomical growth or the welfare of Malaysian workers," he added.

In the light of their recent actions, especially, Dr Mahathir said, it is time the labour force and the union members review the performance of these leaders. "They (workers and union members) cannot allow these leaders to continue doing damage to the image of the country as a means to attain their personal goals."

Dr Mahathir praised the Cuepacs leadership for being responsible, matured, reasonable, moderate and sensitive towards national interests.

"This brand of leadership does not render Cuepacs ineffective. On the contrary, Cuepacs has proved that without having to resort to

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confrontational means, it has been able to resolve various issues related to the rights and interests of public sector employees," he said.

Speaking to journalists later, the Human Resources Minister said he will brief the Prime Minister on the recent International Labour Organisation (ILO) and International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) controversy at next week's Cabinet meeting.

Lim, who led the Malaysian delegation to the ILO Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, recently, briefed the Cabinet the first time last week.

The second Cabinet report is expected to be more detailed and to contain recommendations for action against the MTUC for its involvement in the IMF's campaign during the ILO Conference to suspend Malaysia's membership in the ILO. The three-week ILO conference ends today.

Lim said he was not surprised that the IMF's petition met with failure at the ILO. This is because the petition, which accused Malaysia of violating the right of its 130,000 electronics workers to form unions, was baseless.