

9 JAN 1996

Mahathir-Workers

SETTLE LABOUR DISPUTES IN CIVILISED MANNER, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 9 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the time has come to adopt more civilised ways of resolving disputes between employers and employees.

Opening the 20th Convention of Cuepacs at Wisma MCA here, the Prime Minister said it meant arbitration by a third party. If negotiations could not produce a solution, the problem should be referred to a third party with provision for appeal to a higher authority if any party was dissatisfied with the result.

"This should be the way we resolve disputes between any parties or violation of the law by any side," he said.

Without the system of justice found in Malaysia, the country would sink into chaos, he added.

Some 800 delegates representing the 180,000 members of Cuepacs from 95 affiliates are attending the three-day triennial convention which will see a contest for the post of president and other key posts this year.

Dr Mahathir said if industrial relations or claims by workers could be resolved through arbitration, losses from strike action or threats to strike would not occur.

"With that, even if the arbitrator decides to grant the increase in wages sought, the cost of the strike will not be added to the cost of production or the product," he added.

Also, Malaysia would be able to continue to compete with other countries in the markets for any products and this will further boost the country's progress as well as benefit everyone.

Dr Mahathir urged trade union members to consider the idea although it was a radical one and, perhaps, hard to accept.

"Some quarters may think there is some ulterior motive. But, let's not shut ourselves to the idea. Just consider it," he said.

He said the government bore no ill motive against workers because "what we have done have all benefited them."

Malaysia was fortunate because primitive actions like strikes were not often resorted to to settle disputes between employers and workers; most of the disputes were resolved through negotiations or arbitration, he added.

In this way, industrial peace could be preserved to attract more foreign investors as well as increase job opportunities.

Dr Mahathir said possibly in the past there was no other way to settle workers' claims other than to resort to threats or action which jeopardised the employers' business and property through strikes, or the workers' source of income through lock-outs.

He added: "But, today, our civilisation recognises and accepts workers' rights and that their interests be given fair attention.

"Do we still need a test of strength or resilience in settling problems between employers and workers? Isn't this primitive?"

He said the situation in the West, which believed in the test of might and willingness to accept self-destruction as a way of settling problems, only brought detriment to everyone, including the employers and employees.

"Because the West has a welfare system for the unemployed, workers do not fear losing their jobs," he added.

He noted as odd, however, how those governments were to pay unemployment benefits when the economy was good but in an economic downturn, the system posed a heavy burden to them.

He said: "Looking at the situation in Malaysia, should we not think again about the use of threats and strikes to settle problems?"

In view of the likelihood of strike action or lock-out, the negotiating parties, the talks become tense and a wise decision was difficult to reach, he added. -- BERNAMA