

01/08/1997

Errant bosses be warned

MALAYSIA'S rapid industrialisation and massive infrastructure development has made an excessive demand for workers resulting in the current tight labour situation. While full employment and better income have improved the people's living standards and quality of life, there is a price to pay. Not only has the country to import labour but also the local workforce has grown to be choosy. In fact, some have blamed the plentiful job opportunities as the reason for lower productivity vis-a-vis wage increases.

Complaints by employers that they cannot get local workers, especially for the construction and service industries as well as factories, have been heard for some time now. Allowing these sectors to bring in foreign workers appears to be the immediate answer to maintain growth.

That there have been employers displacing local workers in favour of foreign ones is neither a new phenomenon nor a surprising development. The motivation is expediency, primarily that foreign workers are undoubtedly easier to manage and perhaps to exploit. The Human Resources Ministry's move to bring the problem to the fore shows that it is keeping tabs. But this week's statement by Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek gives the impression that enough is enough. He has the reports stemming from complaints against errant bosses, most of whom are found to be manufacturing industries, particularly in the Klang Valley. From next week, he will conduct spot checks to get first-hand information. Declaring that the Government will not tolerate the action of those employers out to take the authorities for a ride, he warned perpetrators of revocation of permits to recruit foreign labour and action against them.

Aside from moving against this unhealthy practice, the Minister should do more towards reducing the nation's dependence on foreign workers. It is only about 10 days ago that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad drove home the need for Malaysians to change with the times by adopting more productive approaches to business or risk having the country being overrun by foreign workers. With an estimated 1.8 million aliens in their midst, about 8.5 per cent of the entire population and one-quarter of the workforce, locals know only too well by now the dangers of over-dependence on outsiders. Worries have been expressed regarding possible risk to health and security.

The ministry should conduct an extensive survey on the labour requirements of all industries. In issuing work permits, it is prudent to take into account preferences of the local workforce as a way of protecting these jobs. In areas where there is a predominance of foreign workers, it is imperative that these labour-intensive industries mechanise. Retraining the local workforce has to be aggressively stepped up. The directive to the hotel industry to sponsor a local apprentice to the Human Resource Department Council's Hotel Industry Apprenticeship Scheme for every foreign worker it employs is a move in the right direction.

Perhaps, the time has come for the Government to enforce a quota system on all industries for the recruitment of foreign workers. Such a move should discourage employers from making excuses that locals are not interested in the jobs. For those industries which really find it difficult to get workers, it is a clear signal to them to look for viable alternatives.

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