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A day as good as any to count blessings

WORKERS in Malaysia should count their blessings as they celebrate Workers Day today. Although the economic downturn that hit the region in July last year caused 20,000 Malaysians to lose their jobs, they are better off than workers in many other countries. In Indonesia, Thailand and the Phillipines, more than 15 million workers have been made jobless as a direct result of the financial turmoil. Here, retrenched workers have at least been provided with the resources to seek alternative jobs. In celebrating Workers Day, workers in Malaysia should show their solidarity by not resorting to any detrimental measures when dealing with the current employment situation. The Government, with its many level-headed leaders, has been diligent in introducing measures to counter the negative effects of the economic slowdown. With effort being focussed on not burdening workers, the Government has reiterated that in confronting the economic problem, workers should maintain a high spirit and not be easily daunted by negative sentiments. While the authorities are doing their level best to get the economy back on track, workers must also show their support by increasing their productivity.

Workers Day is celebrated in recognition and appreciation of a worker's contribution towards economic development. However, workers the world over still have a great deal to accomplish. In Malaysia, for instance, workers have a well diversified responsibility. Not only must they see that the country moves smoothly towards realising the objectives of Vision 2020, but they must also strive to ensure that the economic downturn is resolved swiftly and without too much damage. Malaysians are grateful to the leadership of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who in managing the economic problems, have made it possible for the rakyat to keep their jobs.

At a time when workers in other countries are losing jobs and taking to the streets, workers in Malaysia are living in harmony. When banks in Thailand, South Korea and Indonesia had to shut down, Malaysian financial institution managed to cope through mergers and acquisitions. Although a few companies did succumb to the economic malaise, we are confident that Malaysia will be able to weather the storm and emerge triumphant. The international trust which is evident in the form of inflowing foreign direct investment (FDI) to the country, is more than welcome. All in all the Government seems to gathered the best of all the initiatives taken by other authorities in the region, and implemented them here.

As far as employment is concerned, the demand for workers is still high as there have been many instances in industrial estates, where workers who had been laid off were immediately absorbed by other companies. The forecast for the unemployment rate, at 3.5 per cent this year, is relatively minor. Although the forecast is up from last year's 2.5 per cent, Malaysia is still in a full-employment situation, based on the 4 per cent benchmark. While retrenched workers in other countries are not guaranteed any compensation, Malaysia has proposed the setting up of a training fund. To be managed by the Human Resources Development Council, the fund, with an intial sum of RM2.2 milion, will provide the necessary skills for workers through the Training Scheme for Retrenched Employees. The amendments to the Employment Act 1955, which is currently being tabled in parliament, is a timely move given of the current economic situation. The 43-year old law will now guarantee more protection and

benefits for workers, bringing it in line with its counterparts in industrialised nations. The amendments are expected to create a better labour scenario where part-time workers are recognised by law and a flexi-wage system based on productivity is encouraged. These are only a few examples of how the Government is safeguarding its workers. The Government will continue its efforts to ensure that workers sleep in peace, with a roof over their heads, food on the table and an education for their children. Happy Workers Day!

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