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Labour's vital economic role

LABOUR is a vital cog in the engine that drives any nation's economy. If it stalls so also will the economy. It follows therefore workers can be a disruptive and dangerous force. Especially when the economy takes a downturn and plunges into a recession. That we have seen in a few countries around us. Workers amok in the streets, rather than manning assembly plants, cause greater damage than the ills of battered economies.

We, too, are enduring trying times. The country is in recession. Retrenchment, though not in the scale in neighbouring countries, has touched us too. So also pay reduction and withdrawals of various and variable allowances. In the face of adversity Malaysian workers, as a group, have displayed a commendable stoicism. The laid-off accepted their lot with rectitude and sought alternative work. Many gracefully accepted voluntary separation schemes; others, thinner pay packets. Of these, many have shown remarkable resiliency in taking second jobs or vocations to weather the hard times.

Clearly then the Malaysian workers have manifested that they are hardy, resilient and, what is perhaps the noblest virtue, that they are responsible. They did and do not agitate. They have even agreed to concessions in new collective agreements with their employers. This sense of responsibility among workers is evident in two different sets of statistics, provided by the director-general of the Industrial Relations Department of the Human Resources Ministry and published in a news report on Aug 30.

One is the decline in man-days lost as a result of industrial dispute over the first six months of the year compared to the number over the same period last year. In the first half of this year, 1,479 man-days were lost; last year, the figure was 2,236 days. Two, more new collective agreements were signed compared to the same period. This year only 84 CAs have yet to be concluded. This is a marked improvement of the first half of last year when 132 were in abeyance.

The DG of Industrial Relations, Ismail Abdul Rahim, attributes this better industrial harmony to two factors. Workers are willing to negotiate disputes with employers. They are less inclined to down tools. Many unions, chastened by the hard times of less profits of companies, have adopted the spirit of "give and take". Companies have agreed that the CAs will be reviewed when times change and the economy rebounds.

These developments are encouraging. They portend well for the country and the economy. For this forbearance of not aggravating an already contracted economy, the nation is grateful to Malaysian workers. This was the gist and grist of a part of the speech to the nation on the eve of the country's 41st year of independence by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. He expressed gratitude to Malaysian workers who had laboured to develop the country over the past four decades. They galvanised the economy, especially over the past decade when the Gross Domestic Product growth rate was the best in the world.

If their role was of great import in the good times, it is greater now as the country faces the most testing times in its economic history. They should rise to these demanding times. They should stand shoulder to shoulder with their employers and with the Government and bear the yoke of hauling the country's economy back to the road that leads to Vision 2020.

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