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Pursuing quality workforce goal

HUMAN resource development is by far the single most important factor in Malaysia's growth in the next millennium. Of late, we have been reminded of its crucial importance by the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers and the World Trade Organisation. Last week, this point was again highlighted, and aptly by the country's Manpower Department.

The FMM emphasised that reorganising the workforce to meet the demand of present and future market needs and high-technology industries must be the nation's priority. While political stability remains Malaysia's strongest factor in attracting foreign investments, the country needs more than that as it moves into value-added industries. It is not a simple case of investing in machinery but more in the retraining of workers, restructuring of job specifications, research and development in product designs, among other things. "There is a need to restructure ourselves especially in creating a pool of high-quality labour," said the FMM.

Making the same point, the WTO in its report released last month, warned that Malaysia's scarcity of skilled labour threatens to erode its industrial competitiveness. Noting the urgency of the matter, it is heartening to hear the announcement by the Manpower Department that more skilled manpower training programmes will be created despite the expenditure cut as a result of the economic downturn. For instance, employers in the manufacturing sector with reduced orders could retrain and upgrade their workers' skills. Training costs can be refunded from the Human Resource Development Fund. Such a practice is not new as in Canada, for example, employers retrain workers during a slowdown so that there are skilled workers when the economy picks up. The good news is that the department has not received any indication from major manufacturers on cutbacks in production or impending retrenchments. There is still a shortage of workers, particularly in the manufacturing and plantation sectors.

Malaysia, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said not too long ago, has the capacity to upgrade the skills of its more than eight million workforce. What is called for is a determined effort. Herein lies the responsibility of employers and workers' unions to work in concert with the Government in making this a reality. Given the great need for skilled and semi-skilled manpower in the country's rapidly changing environment, the recent revelation that retraining of workers in technology and new production skills by employers under the HRDF is low, is not encouraging. The focus hitherto has been on services. The HRDF, set up a few years ago, is meant to assist companies in the retraining and upgrading of workers' skills.

While the Malaysian Trades Union Congress may have a point in calling for mandatory retraining of workers to overcome the present employers' reluctance, it has not spelt out its vital motivating role. Coercion to secure compliance is never a sound strategy. Merely taking employers to task for being more interested in making profits is certainly insufficient. Has the MTUC sat down with the employers' federation and the workers' representatives to find the best possible way to achieve this objective? If it has not done so, it is better late than never. What about the necessary input of drawing up the steps that have to be taken?

Training and retraining of the workforce must be a national effort, a shared responsibility between workers and employers. The unfaltering

support of the Government can be counted on. But there has to be an accompanying conscientious effort on the part of unions and employers to motivate the workers so that enough unskilled workers will be convinced to take on training seriously. Apathy and taking a lackadaisical attitude will ultimately translate into the nation losing its competitive edge. There is indeed no time to lose but to get on with the urgent task at hand.

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