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## Tackling the important issues

THE trade unions' role in this country's economic progress has always been significant. Their contribution to the on-going efforts to revive the economy is even more so. According to the Human Resources Ministry, 5 per cent of new collective agreements signed this year contained no provisions for salary increase for the next three years. This is simply unprecedented. In the last three months, trade unions in more than 200 establishments also agreed to accept pay cuts to reduce the burden on their respective employers. And there has been no serious threat to disrupt industrial harmony.

Even before the crisis hit the region about a year ago, Malaysian trade unions had always proven to be more level-headed and less prone to militant tactics than their Asian counterparts. One or two of our trade union leaders with international status may have gone abroad and criticised the Government and its labour laws, but that was about it. At home, they also criticised the Government and the labour laws, but they then went about their business of resolving disputes with companies or seeking the assistance of the ministry to resolve problems.

Trade unionists in this country sit on various boards, including the Employees Provident Fund and the Social Security Organisation and some of them are members of the very high-level Malaysian Business Council and the National Economic Action Council, both chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. On labour policies, both the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) and the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services are represented at the tripartite National Labour Advisory Council chaired by the Human Resources Minister. Trade union members are free to join any political party and in the past, have knowingly and openly used their positions as an extension to their own political aspirations and beliefs.

However, in times of chronic need, trade unions in Malaysia have been known to be very sympathetic with the Government and supportive of policies and programmes aimed at restoring growth. One such instance was the mid-1980s economic downturn. The National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE) had offered to accept a wage moratorium. This was the same trade union - then under a new general secretary by the name of Mr K. Sanmugam - which had hit the streets with banners to demand a pay increase, that organised a nationwide protest by asking members to go to work in t-shirts and sarongs, pulled out of the MTUC because the congress' leaders were too involved in partisan politics and whose actions led to the creation of a rival labour umbrella body, the Malaysian Labour Organisation.

It is rather disappointing therefore, now that the country is going through a worse period than the mid-1980s recession, to discover that the NUBE under the not-so-young Sanmugam is acting out quite a different role. Its scathing attack against the management of a local bank and its threat to get its 30,000 members to wear protest badges against this particular bank over the suspension from work of one union member is a gross overkill. In the union's letter to the bank entitled "Ultimatum", Sanmugam gave the management of the bank 48 hours to "respond" to its demands or face the consequences. The fact is that the bank had also suspended the officer involved in the alleged assault case involving the union member and Sanmugam is probably aware of it. The union leader said, "We do not speak for officers", but leaving that fact out does distort the whole

nature of the grievance.

If there is a dispute - and there seems to be one now - there are ways to resolve it without having to issue ultimatums or rock industrial peace. The bank says it suspended both its employees - the non-union officer and the union member - to facilitate investigation into the incident. NUBE should not obstruct the process unless it has lost confidence in procedures and wants to take the law into its own hands. Sanmugam will do well to heed his advice in the letter that both management and the union work together to make the bank stronger. In his own words, "there are so many important issues to tackle instead of focusing on petty and trivial ones".

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