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Trade unions have a duty to maintain industrial harmony

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MAY Day or Workers' Day celebration this year stressed the importance of unity and solidarity among workers to overcome the challenges that lie ahead in view of the economic slowdown.

The theme for this year's celebration which is Workers unite towards the eradication of misery is most apt in view of problems like retrenchment, lower income and rising prices.

It is most encouraging to note the unflinching spirit of our workers as they gathered to celebrate the annual event organised by the Malaysian Trades Union Congress and Cuepacs.

Given the present economic hardship, where the major pre-occupation should be a speedy economic recovery, trade unions have a duty to guide their members towards making the right choices.

In this connection, Malaysian unions have not been found wanting as evidenced by statements by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Furthermore Human Resources Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek was reported to have given due recognition to the role of unions in maintaining industrial harmony.

Of late the MTUC seems to be very involved in consumerism. While it is not wrong for unions to educate members on consumer rights, both the MTUC and Cuepacs must not lose sight of their more important role in preparing workers for challenges, the most crucial being retrenchment.

As the greatest concern of the nation and industry is productivity, trade unions will have to impress upon workers in both the public and private sectors the need to give their best.

Workers must also brace themselves to face certain realities. One of these is not to expect a pay rise. The other may concern cost-cutting in the organisation they work for.

However, employers should not find the slightest excuse to retrench. If during good times employers have benefited due to the diligence and loyalty of their employees, during bad times they should try their best to retain their employees.

Companies should exhaust all cost-cutting measures and use retrenchment only as a last resort. But if workers have to be retrenched, the least employers should ensure is that all their benefits are settled speedily.

It would be ideal if there was a fund to take care of retrenched workers. The director-general of the Labour Department had called for the setting up of a Wages and Benefits Fund to help laid-off workers some years ago but unfortunately it was not approved.

In the absence of the retrenchment fund the Government has introduced a Retrenchment Workers Training Scheme to provide skills training for retrenched workers whose employers are registered with the Human Resources Development Council.

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