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Partnership worth maintaining

JUST a month ago, the Government announced it would reinstate civil servants' perks and allowances. The move, which will benefit an estimated 80,000 government officers is expected to add quite a bit to the Government's wage bill. It was felt, however, that the employees deserved it as the suspension of these benefits, which formed part of the Government's belt-tightening measures, had contributed towards the economic recovery process. With the savings, coupled with improved revenue flows as a result of the better economic performance, the Government was in the position to give back the perks and allowances.

The bonus payment requested by the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (Cuepacs), the umbrella body for government trade unions, is a different issue, though. While the perks and benefits just reinstated had been inherent in the government sector's wage structure, bonuses will involve additional expenditure. Based on past practices, a month's bonus will set the Treasury back by well over RM1 billion. This is a lot of money to spend on bonuses, even during the good times, and the Government had agreed in the past to pay only after making very sure it could afford it. As the economy is still trying to shake off some of the terrible effects of the regional crisis, it has to make doubly sure that it could afford to meet the 800,000-odd civil servants' bonus claims.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said the Government will study the demand. And based on their experience in dealing with the Prime Minister, the Cuepacs' leaders should know that its demand will be given due consideration. After all, even without having to be asked, the Government had in June offered each civil servant a special payment of RM600. Dr Mahathir said the Government will not deny civil servants the bonus privilege if it has the resources to pay each of them a minimum of RM1,000 more. But Cuepacs must not expect the Government to beg, steal or borrow to meet its demand.

There have been many cases of trade unions and workers, both in the private sector as well as in government, resorting to industrial action to back their claims for higher salaries and better terms. In the history of Cuepacs, some past leaders had created some of the worst havoc over some monetary claims. In the mid-1980s when the congress was led by a leader who later proved to have been harbouring political ambitions even at that time, Dr Mahathir was even threatened with a boycott of the Barisan Nasional at the general elections by civil servants. Of course, many government employees and trade union leaders had lambasted the Cuepacs official because they could not agree with an such confrontational and irrational stand. The current leaders of Cuepacs must be wary of anyone among them who may have the intentions to exploit the bonus issue to serve his or her own interests, especially with the general elections around the corner.

Incidentally, there were people who suggested that it was a general election gimmick when the Government made the RM600 special payment to each of its employees in June. It's clear now that they had misjudged the Government's policy - and sincerity. If fishing for votes was the intention then, surely the general elections would have long been held. Similarly, the bonuses paid to government employees in past years could not have been influenced by general elections, since this country does not

go to the polls every year.

Whether or not the Government is able to meet its demand, Cuepacs must be prepared to act accordingly and responsibly. The congress has played a very positive role, particularly during the past two difficult years, to give the necessary support and cooperation to the Government and national efforts aimed at economic recovery. There is no doubt that the Government has its workers' interest at heart. On their part, the workers have continued to work hard and improve the efficiency of the government machinery. It is a partnership that has worked well during the good times as well as the bad, and deserves to be maintained.

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