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Daily meaning, daily bread

RENEWED resolve to increase productivity must not be the sole core of Workers' Day celebrations. The workers' welfare have an impact on social equity and cohesion - issues that determine a country's temperament and, in turn, its competitiveness in attracting investors.

If, at all, this day is to have any meaning beyond the ritualistic words of appreciation for the workers, it must lead to greater reflection and action to transform their economic relationship in a way that enhances performance and economic sustainability.

What is needed are financial creativity, committed and concerned corporate leadership, political will and a workforce ready to embrace the change, complexity and risk brought about by the economic challenges in the 21st century.

One way is, as advised by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for the group-wide sharing of profits by employers who made higher profits. It imparts a sense of ownership. There are other means of "stakeowner-isation": ex-gratia or bonuses linked to share appreciation or hitching some of the profits for ESOS funding. Nor should wage increment, where justified, be seen as purely dependent upon the grace of the shareholders.

The issue of minimum wage must be realistically and expeditiously resolved. A win-win solution is possible. The search for it must begin with an appreciation of workers' contribution.

The word "work" stems from the Greek for sacrifice, implying that a worker sacrifices his energy and, in return, is compensated by a certain price.

The etymology of work, too, suggests a high level of personal commitment and dedication. Price connotes exchange. So, work should not be seen in terms of sweat and toil or pure labour. Rather it is a productive input in exchange for a certain value - wages.

The advent of the k-economy will bring new challenges. This necessitates the implementation of a road-map for workers which entails individualised career progression where one can see the light at the end of the tunnel. This career road-map must go beyond mere skills acquisition or vague idea of productive outcome. As put by workers' advocate Studs Terkel, "Work is about daily meaning and daily bread. For recognition as well as cash; for astonishment rather than torpor; for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. We have a right to ask of work that includes meaning, recognition, astonishment and life."

Human resources training is not new in the country. But it should embrace a wider participation, higher vision hitched to the national economic strategy, forward-looking by anticipating the skills needed in years to come and prepare ways of ensuring the workers' interests in the face of globalisation.

As reiterated by Dr Mahathir, the tide of globalisation is irreversible. We are all witnesses to a century-long evolution in production and politics that is fusing labour-saving technology, global capitalist market and free trade. The combination is rightly regarded as threatening as seen from the subjugation of neighbouring nations to IMF.

The preservation of national interests against this combination forms the capstone of not only the workers' struggle, but also that of the Government and civic society.

The solution lies in some sort of shared capitalism where workers have a stake in the wealth they help to create.

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