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Doing the best for workers

WORKERS' Day used to be marked by fiery, sometimes anti-government, speeches and massive rallies to suggest solidarity. For several years now it is celebrated in a more sober and moderate mood. The three years of economic difficulties caused by the Asian financial crisis have taught everyone, including workers and trade unions, that there is a lot to be thankful for. We all know that things could have gotten a lot worse, that Malaysia managed to avoid the pitfalls that some of its neighbours plunged headlong into because of the ability, and the willingness, of everyone to work together as friends in their great adversity.

In some of the crisis-hit countries, workers turned against their employers, companies sacked their staff, and governments had to surrender their independence to experts from some international monetary agency that promised to bail out the economies from the great crisis. About 20 million workers lost their jobs after the crisis hit in July 1997. In Malaysia, more than 100,000 people lost theirs in the last two years or so but most were re-employed by other companies and today as the economy is recovering there are, once again, more jobs than job-seekers. Most Malaysians are aware that they get to keep their jobs because the right policies and measures were implemented.

These policies and measures would not have seen the light of day if there had not been close cooperation within the tripartite partnership of workers, employers and the Government. While workers staged strikes in South Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines, workers and trade unions in Malaysia rallied behind the Government without being told to. They defended the capital controls and other measures the Government wished to implement to save the economy and they refrained from taking any action that could jeopardise the health of the private sector and the economy. Some of them agreed to salary reductions to help their employers survive the hard times, others made no fresh demands when their collective agreements expired. There was not a single major industrial action during the last three years, save for a bank dispute provoked by the sacking of unionised workers and a controversy over a video tape of a union leader who attacked the Malaysian Government and its labour policies during an overseas seminar. This controversy involved the then Human Resources Minister, Datuk Lim Ah Lek, and the MTUC general secretary.

The behaviour of the trade union leaders in their most trying hours is exemplary and deserve mention and tribute. They may not have formulated the economic policies and strategies which brought recovery to the economy without any adverse effects, but if the workers had not cooperated the Malaysian economy would have been worse off. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's message to the country's nine million workers that the test of strength between trade unions and Government is not the way to go when workers and their trade unions have a demand they want considered, therefore, is honest as well as timely.

The economic recovery should not be used as an excuse to justify any union's intention to go back to the old ways of confrontation. It should be used to build on the newfound strength of the country's tripartism. The ability to cooperate and to help another should continue, and this will only be possible if all three parties are willing to do so. There will be various issues to bring up and resolve as the economy recovers, no doubt, and they could certainly be tackled without having to resort to methods

which serve only to safeguard one party's interests without regards to the other parties' positions or the larger interest of the nation. Take the cue from the Prime Minister - avoid test of strength and discuss the problems. Nobody should act unilaterally and certainly the outside parties - the International Monetary Fund or the International Labour Organisation - should be left out of domestic issues. This is the 21st century, surely we - the Government, the unions and the employers - can decide for ourselves what's best for our workers.

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