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Poles apart on wage issue

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The country's two biggest trade unions today marked Workers' Day in contrasting styles with the MTUC calling for the implementation of the minimum wage system, and Cuepacs agreeing with the Prime Minister that it could not be introduced now.

Cuepacs president N. Siva Subramaniam concurred with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that such a system should not be implemented without taking into account the cost of productivity.

However, MTUC president Senator Zainal Rampak said the congress would embark on a nationwide rally to garner support for the implementation of the system.

Cuepacs is the umbrella organisation for unions in the civil service, while the MTUC represents unions in the private sector and statutory bodies.

Dr Mahathir in his Workers' Day message yesterday said a minimum wage of RM1,200 a month, if implemented immediately, would fuel production costs.

Both the Government and private sectors, he said, would not be able to bear such high costs.

However, he hoped workers would be able to earn RM1,200 a month based on productivity within their ranks and if their employers were doing well.

Speaking at a Workers' Day gathering of more than 4,000 workers at the Civic Centre in Petaling Jaya, Zainal said the MTUC wanted to see the implementation of minimum wages and would not give up until its efforts were successful.

He said MTUC's last resort to ensure the implementation of minimum wages would be to stage a nationwide picket.

"However, we will try to avoid this and try to seek a resolution amicably.

"Minimum wage is not a special privilege. It is merely our right to be able to meet the daily needs of our families," he said.

He said a special committee headed by him would be submitting a fresh memorandum to the Government soon on a new minimum wage amount - between RM600 and RM1,200.

The committee was set up during a two-day symposium on minimum wages organised by MTUC last month.

Zainal also asked the Government to come up with its own study on minimum wages before questioning the MTUC-International Labour Organisation's recent findings on the matter.

He said it was impractical to take into consideration overtime allowances when determining minimum wages for workers as not all employees enjoyed such benefits.

"Working overtime on a daily basis to make ends meet also does not augur well with efforts to nurture strong social values considering the time parents would be away from their children," he said.

Zainal also urged the Government to reconsider the proposed National Retrenchment Scheme as there were still cases of companies retrenching workers without prior notice or compensation.

Other issues raised were to press for the freedom of association for workers and also for employers to provide day-care centres for their employees' children with 70 per cent of the operation cost borne by the employer and the remaining by employees.

On the proposed retirement age of 58, he said, its implementation should

be automatic and not depend on recommendation from heads of department.

MTUC women section chairperson Silam Hassan launched a campaign to secure the Government's and employer's commitment to provide comprehensive maternity protection for women.

At a Workers' Day celebration in Perlis, Siva Subramaniam said Cuepacs accepted the reasons given by the Government for its inability to set a minimum wage of RM1,200 per month.

He said Cuepacs understood the implications of having such a minimum wage, such as demand for higher salaries by all levels of workers as mentioned by the Prime Minister in his Workers' Day message.

He, however, said Cuepacs would continue to pursue the matter and suggest a more flexible amount depending on each worker's skills and knowledge.

"We will hold a meeting with MTUC next week to find a common stand on the issue," he said after attending the national-level celebration at Gua Kelam Recreational Park today.

Siva Subramaniam said workers should not view the Government's decision not to implement the RM1,200 minimum wage as an outright rejection of their demand.

"Dr Mahathir did not say the Government was against the idea of having a minimum wage. What he actually said was that the RM1,200 minimum wage was simply not practical.

"Therefore, we may still find a more reasonable approach such as a formula which can accommodate all levels of workers without causing a burden to the country's economy."

Siva Subramaniam added further studies and discussions over the minimum wage issue should be held between the unions and Government before a final decision could be reached.

He said although it would be easier to implement the minimum wage in the civil service, Cuepacs would not push the Government for an immediate decision, but would join MTUC in finding a solution to the issue.

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