

# Decent work the way forward

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INTERNATIONAL Labour Organisation (ILO) director-general Juan Somavia met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on August 23 at his office in Putrajaya for a broad-based discussion on several issues of mutual interest.

The meeting, which lasted a little more than an hour, was the first ever to take place between a serving ILO director-general and a Malaysian Prime Minister.

Needless to say, it is significant to Malaysia in general and to Malaysian workers in particular.

The ILO, and Somavia in particular, has effectively articulated the concept of "decent work" and perceives its acceptance and implementation as the way forward in a rapidly globalising new millennium.

The concept, first introduced by Somavia in his report to the 87th International Labour Conference held in Geneva in June 1999, has been refined and streamlined by subsequent Labour Conferences, seminars and meetings, and serves as the ILO's blueprint -- its mission statement for the new millennium.

"Decent work" identifies the following criteria for consideration and implementation by ILO member states:

- ┆ full, productive and freely-chosen employment;
- ┆ employment creation;
- ┆ core labour standards;
- ┆ fair wages and benefits that are consistent with prevailing living costs;
- ┆ education and training;
- ┆ gender equality;
- ┆ social protection; and,
- ┆ social dialogue.

"Decent work" is the ILO's strategic formula, drawn up as a result of in-depth tripartite discussions between governments, employers and workers.

It aims to optimise gains from productivity, technology, quality assurance and process efficiency.

"Decent work" should, in all fairness, gain the support of employers as it also serves their interests with predictable objectivity and measurable clarity.

It meets today's needs and addresses to-

## UNION LEADERS' SAY

By SENATOR ZAINAL RAMPAK

Given that today's technology is tomorrow's history, it is difficult to imagine what shape, form and identity globalisation is going to take in the coming years

morrow's expectations.

With new employment trends gaining entry into the world of work as the enterprises' response to globalisation, it is inevitable that certain old practices have to give way to new ones.

These, among others, include redefining and re-delineating the direction, scope and dimension of our industrial relations processes.

Employer-union relations, accentuated by the collective bargaining process, will have to take centre-stage.

These "structural" changes will have to be appropriately recognised and accommodated by way of corresponding amendments to prevailing labour legislation, which should include defining, developing and protecting workers' individual and collective interests.

I believe efforts along these directions are already under way within the portals of the Ministry of Human Resources.

Till this point in time, nobody, not even the policy-makers of the Group of Seven, have a clear idea as to what bodes well for globalisation.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO), and its subsequent Technical and Ministe-

rial Meetings held regularly, are at best "educated guesswork" exercises aimed at predicting the eventual direction of globalisation.

The WTO Declaration adopted in Singapore in December 13 1996 serves as an important reference point for these initiatives.

Given that today's technology is tomorrow's history (or even garbage in certain cases), it is difficult to imagine what shape, form and identity globalisation is going to take in the coming years.

Employment trends, and by extension governments', employers' and workers' expectations, have to be in tandem with these largely inevitable "structural" changes.

The private sector, spearheaded by multinational enterprises, is expected to play a leading role in this process.

It is, however, doubtful whether the private sector would be able to effectively influence, let alone direct, the behaviour of economic forces that are largely built on the underpinnings of supply, demand, purchasing power, expectations and orientation.

With workers constituting more than half the world's population of 6.6 billion, it is small wonder that certain governments are beginning to take every possible effort to get closer to workers and their unions.

These governments know that by pooling their collective strengths, the total impact of these pooling efforts will be more than the sum of the individual power elements put together.

It would be well within the fitness of things if employers could also see the wisdom of these initiatives and dovetail their energies in the true spirit of social dialogue and tripartite participation.

*The writer is Malaysian Trades Union Congress president and a member of the ILO governing body.*