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Boost for consumer issues

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THE Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) Workers' Consumer Movement, 3PMTUC, will publish its own newsletter called "Suara 3PMTUC" this year.

The move, according to MTUC president Senator Zainal Rampak, is expected to make 3PMTUC's presence more significant after more than two years of its birth.

He said the newsletter could make its first appearance by this year if the movement can expand its membership base.

"With bigger membership, we can start publishing a newsletter.

"We'll call it Suara 3PMTUC and through the newsletter, we can circulate prices of goods and other information to the members," he said in Petaling Jaya last week.

Zainal, who is also 3PMTUC president, was speaking to Business Times in conjunction with the World Consumer Rights Day today.

He said the movement will go on a membership drive this year to get more people to join the organisation.

"We now have almost 2000,000 members from corporate memberships (through the workers unions) and another 100 members who are individuals, ranging from professionals and students," he said.

He said the target of the membership drive would be the individuals.

Asked on 3PMTUC's achievements so far, Zainal said although the movement had not venture all out into consumerism issues, it had voiced out a few central topics such as prices of goods and necessities during festivals.

The move by 3PMTUC in joining forces with Federation of Malaysian Consumer Associations, Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services and Malaysian Youth Council in December 1999, to "boycott" consumer goods including chicken, had caught the attention of many, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The coalition of unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) was formed due to the escalating prices of necessities when Christmas, Hari Raya and Chinese New Year were celebrated one after another.

They had also staged protest on the toll rate increase. The 3PMTUC had even suggested the Government to amend the Employment Act 1955 to compel employers to pay toll charges incurred by workers when travelling to and from the workplace.

This year, which observes the 18th anniversary of the World Consumer Rights Day, also sees the 3PMTUC seeking to be more active in consumerism issues.

There are several plans in the pipeline, Zainal said, which will be implemented in cooperation with various parties.

"We are we are talking to automobile industry workshop for a collaboration in providing service for 3PMTUC members," he said.

The Organisation is also discussing with a Takaful operator in Kuala Lumpur to allow members to participate in a takaful scheme.

He said 3PMTUC is also organising a half-day forum in conjunction with World Consumer Rights Day.

"We will get good speakers from various sectors such as women organisation to speak on prices of household goods and children needs and academicians to speak on matters related to consumers.

"We will also try to get Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and representative from the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers to be the panel speakers," he said.

Zainal said the forum will be held next month and it will not only be opened to MTUC members but also to the public.

The 3PMTUC was set up in late 1998 and it was officially launched by the then Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Megat Junid Megat Ayob.

To sceptics who doubted the MTUC's move to set up its consumer wing, Zainal said consumerism is related to workers' movement because there is no point for the Union to fight for higher salaries in collective agreements when price increases exceeding wage adjustment by 15 to 30 per cent.

In his words during the New Year message in 1999, "The 3PMTUC will be the ears, eyes and heartbeat of the consumers in the country to exploit any form of exploitation by middlemen, producers and retailers who are profiteering."

Looking ahead, the MTUC's consumer movement may want to reconsider pursuing its proposed workers fair-price shop.

The Workers' Shop, which was supposed to be launched soon after the setting up of the 3PMTUC, had to be postponed due to some reasons.

It is understood that lack of fund and expertise is the main obstacle towards the implementation of this noble idea.

Under the proposal, the shop would buy goods direct from producers and sell it to the public at fair prices. It works like cooperative where members cooperate for collective benefits.

Maybe it is timely for the MTUC to join forces again with other private and public sector unions as well as consumer associations and NGOs to collectively set up the Workers Shop or whatever name it would be called.

It may be an answer to the escalating prices of essential goods in the country and help putting a cap on inflationary pressure.

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