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Workers need a win-win solution

THE Malaysian Trades Union Congress' (MTUC) statement that it will call off the May 12 picket against the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) if the minister in charge could come up with an amicable solution is welcomed. Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn, however, must ensure that the "solution" he proposes isn't just to appease the trade union leaders. It will be terrible to allow any sign of weakness now, especially at a time when Malaysian workers, who celebrated 21st century's first Labour Day yesterday, are faced with new and unprecedented threats from outside.

Remarks made by G. Rajasekaran, the MTUC secretary-general, in his interview with a foreign newspaper on why the congress was organising the nationwide picket against the EPF, is another reason why Fong must ensure a win-win solution. Rajasekaran, who told the Asian Wall Street Journal that he was "not a militant", said he was adopting the confrontational approach because the Government had taken trade unions in Malaysia for granted. Just as the Government must not be seen as weak in dealing with labour issues, it cannot be deemed as uncaring, either. Rajasekaran's claim is excessive, to say the least, because far from taking trade unions for granted, the Government has done more than many governments in the West to ensure freedom of trade unions. Perhaps the Government is seen as taking trade unions for granted because it has its own ideas, which may be different from the trade unionists', in trying to improve the lot of the workers.

This difference in approach will naturally limit the Government's ability to accommodate the MTUC's demands on the matter regarding the EPF. Rajasekaran and MTUC president Senator Zainal Rampak will be aware that the EPF is accountable to the workers (and employers) who contribute to the fund every month. While both trade unions and the Government have done a lot for workers, the EPF has also contributed significantly in its own ways. In recent years the fund has increased the number of services it provides to the employees, including introducing schemes to buy computers and unit trusts, apart from paying steady annual dividends whether or not the economy is doing well. The appointment of a chief executive officer (CEO) to head the EPF is an attempt by the Government to promote greater professionalism in the operations of the fund, especially in its investment decisions. The CEO, Azlan Mohd Zainol, brings to the EPF rich experience in banking and finance, which will certainly add a welcomed dimension to the running of the fund.

There will always be accusations that the EPF, when it decides to invest in a Malaysian company, is rescuing that company because of its links with the Government. Rajasekaran's interviewer wrote about "alleged mismanagement of the savings of 9.7 million Malaysians invested in... EPF" and "...the fund's disastrous investment in a telecommunications company with historic links to (Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir Mohamad's political party", quotes not necessarily attributed to the trade union leader. There will also always be accusations that some trade unionists are beholden to the international labour movement with considerable financial and political clout.

Preoccupation with such allegations, which is greatly responsible for sparking the EPF-MTUC dispute, weakens and threatens Malaysia's industrial relations, which have long been a strong point in attracting long-term foreign investors to the country. It has also distracted trade unionists,

workers and government officials from the bigger threat that faces the labour movement in this country - the impact of globalisation that has already taken away millions of investment and jobs from Malaysia.

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