

03 MAR 2002

MTUC-Elections

MTUC POLLS TO BE A TAME AFFAIR AFTER LEADERS STRIKE DEAL

By: S. Retnanathan

KUALA LUMPUR, March 3 (Bernama) -- The two-day Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) General Assembly beginning Tuesday appears to be a tame affair than in previous years especially after congress president Senator Zainal Rampak and his deputy Shafie B.P Mammal reached a compromise on a smooth succession.

A total of 584 delegates and 121 observers from 112 affiliated unions are to attend the assembly, with the first day dedicated to administrative matters, passing resolutions, proposing amendments to the MTUC constitution, tabling of accounts and general council's report.

The trend of voting in the election for all top posts except for the deputy presidency are expected to be known on Tuesday when delegates debate resolutions and amendments to the constitution.

This is because one "Team" in the country's largest private sector umbrella union intends to propose that paid employees of a trade union be barred from voting in the election.

The amendment seeks to nullify Section 6 (6) of the MTUC constitution which allows paid employees of a trade union to contest in the national polls.

It will be tabled by Zainal's team while delegates aligned to MTUC Secretary-General G. Rajasekaran are expected to oppose it.

The proposed amendment is so badly wanted by Zainal's supporters who argue that it was vital to safeguard the 750,000-strong MTUC from the paid employees of trade unions.

"We want this amendment to stop paid employees from holding positions at national level, they are actually depriving industry trade unionists from coming to power," said a unionist aligned to Zainal.

The opposing group say the amendment was to prevent Zainal's challenger, Syed Sharir Syed Mohd, the Executive Secretary of the National Union of Transport Equipment and Allied Industries Workers, from making a bid for a post in the parent body in future.

Sharir had contested thrice against Zainal for the MTUC president's post since 1994 and had lost in all the attempts by a small margin.

The amendment, if passed by the delegates, would be contrary to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) 1948 resolution which calls for freedom of association.

Under this resolution, the Geneva-based international labour body advocates that there should be no legal restrictions for any worker to participate actively in trade union activities.

"This has caused them (Zainal's faction) to worry, they are scared Syed Sharir may spring a surprise...he is still young and has many more years to go," said a retired unionist.

Zainal and his deputy Shafie on Feb 18 reached a compromise under which Zainal will step down on Dec 31 and Shafie will take over from Jan 1, 2003.

The move to sign a pact by Zainal is seen by many in trade union circles as a last resort by the veteran trade unionist, who had helmed MTUC for the last 17 years, to cling on to power even if it was for just another 10 months.

Zainal and Rajasekaran, unlike in previous years when they formed a pact to ward off challenges, are at loggerheads this time around due to various issues, including the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) Annuity Scheme, among others.

Rajasekaran's team claim that Zainal had not done anything over the past few years for the betterment of workers in the country and that his endorsement of the Annuity Scheme was the last straw.

Zainal and Shafie sit on the EPF Board that endorsed the Annuity Scheme which was scrapped after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad found that it was detrimental to workers and was a profit venture to six insurance companies.

Zainal fended the allegations by saying that his endorsement was a mistake as he was saddled "with too much paper work to see that the scheme was detrimental to workers."

Another issue which is a bone of contention between the two veteran leaders was the approval given by Zainal to the EPF computer scheme which resulted in the fund's contributors paying RM250 to RM400 more for purchase of computers compared to the normal price in the open market.

"This is the second issue. The first is the annuity scheme, what were they doing when the EPF board decided on this, it is their job to see that the workers get a better deal," said a pro-Rajasekaran trade unionist.

Trade unionists also dispel the notion that this year's election focused too much on jostling for positions rather than tackling issues at hand, especially with retrenchment reaching a new height due to uncertainties in the global economic climate.

They say the fight for positions in the first place was based on issues and dissatisfaction over "unfair deals" workers were given due to lack of protest from the present leadership for better options.

"The challenges are based on issues the present leadership failed to resolve...be it Zainal or Rajasekaran, we need proactive leaders and are keen to be the watchdog for workers' rights in the country," said a neutral trade unionist who would be attending the assembly.

However, judging from the present situation, both Zainal and Rajasekaran should not face much difficulty in fending off challenges although they are not together.

Rajasekaran will be challenged by an unknown Abdul Malek Ariff of the MAS Employees' Union for the secretary-general's post. Shafie has been returned unopposed as MTUC's deputy president.

The assembly will also elect the deputy secretary-general, financial secretary, deputy financial secretary and 11 vice-presidents - five from the private sector, three each from public sector and statutory bodies.

-- BERNAMA

SR AZZ TS