

19/05/2003

Cuepacs: Unions can help woo investors

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Cuepacs president Datuk N. Siva Subramaniam said trade unions must help the country attract foreign investors rather than just fight for workers' demands.

"They must have a paradigm shift where the nation must come first. Wages and benefits can be negotiated, but the nation's prosperity must remain paramount. I agree with the Prime Minister's views on the role of Malaysian workers."

Siva Subramaniam said workers shouldn't expect to receive the same level of wages as those in developed countries, as those countries did not have to compete against China, which is threatening to attract all foreign direct investments from the region.

"Cuepacs has always tried to increase the productivity and improve the skills of its members to make them true knowledge-workers. We have even put aside our demands and participated in increasing the country's competitiveness."

He was commenting on Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement yesterday that workers should not make demands that the country can ill-afford.

In his speech at the 13th national Workers' Day gathering yesterday, Dr Mahathir said the country could not afford to pay higher wages like those in the Western countries or have shorter working hours.

Dr Mahathir also told workers not to resort to industrial action and "tests of strengths" to settle disputes.

Meanwhile, the Malaysian Trades Union Congress said workers' demands for better wages and fewer work-days were fair, given their contributions to the country.

Its president Senator Zainal Rampak said workers' demand for a minimum wage of RM900 a month commensurated with Malaysia's rising cost of living, and that a large number of workers such as security guards and labourers still lived below the poverty line.

"It is a consistent problem that workers here face. Many of them are forced to take extra jobs to supplement their income, even though they and their spouses may both be working. They are barely able to pay for food, transportation, schooling and other costs with just two incomes," he said.

Zainal added that employers would refer to Bank Negara and Finance Ministry economic reports which stated the country's cost of labour to justify their argument that the country's labour costs were high, but the figures were misleading.

"The figures include the wages of workers and top management staff such as directors and chief executives. The latter's high salaries make up 80 per cent of that figures and yet they only represent 10 per cent of the total workforce.

"In essence, the figures, do not represent the actual cost of labour for workers. Salaries of top management match their counterparts in developed countries, but not the salaries of most Malaysian workers," Zainal said.

He said that workers' demand for a five-day work week did not mean that they wanted to work fewer hours, but that they were prepared to work more on their weekdays in exchange for Saturdays off.

He also said union leaders in the country were responsible.