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Workers shouldn't make demands we can't afford, says PM

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Malaysian workers should not make demands that the country can ill-afford, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said the country cannot afford to pay higher wages like in the Western countries or have shorter working hours. Malaysian workers should also not resort to industrial action to settle disputes.

"Their ways (workers in the West) are not suitable for us. We are still a developing country," he said.

"Workers in developed countries need not work too hard. Some work only 35 hours a week, but their pay is 10 times higher. We can't do that."

Dr Mahathir was speaking at the 13th national Workers' Day celebrations at Stadium Putra in Bukit Jalil. The celebrations were attended by thousands of workers from the public and private sectors. Also present were Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn and representatives from unions.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysians had to work hard to catch up with developed countries.

"If we want to work like them, have high pay but not work too hard, believe me, our competitiveness will be affected and there will be no investment and no job opportunities.

"But if we do not make demands that the country can ill-afford, our country will eventually achieve the development envisioned."

It was the practice in Western countries to resort to industrial action and "tests of strength" to resolve industrial disputes.

Dr Mahathir said their philosophy was that the strong would take all for themselves.

"When there are disputes between countries, their way is to go to war and destroy properties and towns. This is the way of testing their strength.

"When there is a workers' dispute, the stronger party and the one who is willing to suffer will win and take everything for themselves.

"This is what the influence of Western countries has taught us - that the way to resolve disputes is through confrontation. The winner takes all and the loser loses all."

He said Malaysia depended on international trade and should maintain its competitiveness to ensure foreign investment kept coming in, creating more jobs.

"To compete, employers must enhance the efficiency, knowledge and skills of their workforce. We are ready to train people."

On wages, the Prime Minister said workers' pay in Malaysia was higher than in neighbouring countries.

This was why many people were willing to come and work in Malaysia, he said.

"But we are not satisfied. We want higher wages all the time. However, this can only be achieved if we maintain our competitiveness.

"If we get high wages, but are not competitive, high pay will not last.

"Although we want to see the wages of Malaysians increase, it must be done in a way that will not jeopardise our competitiveness."

On working hours, Dr Mahathir said Malaysian workers could not yet expect a five-day working week.

He said the Government had already made the first and third Saturdays of the month holidays, but found that there were additional costs of up to

four times more in terms of overtime payment for those working on those days.

He said the escalating costs could erode the country's competitiveness.

"That is why we are careful. We cannot yet afford a five-day week because we have to catch up with developed countries."

Dr Mahathir said some people made excuses that there was no work on Saturday and as such, they should not need to go into the office.

"But believe me, if we made all Saturdays off days, some people will take off after Friday prayers," Dr Mahathir quipped.

He said what was important was that the people were willing to work.

In this regard, the Prime Minister commended doctors, nurses and healthcare workers who were working to prevent Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome from spreading.

"They continue to work even though they are confronted with a disease that can cause death."

Dr Mahathir expressed his appreciation of those workers who placed their lives on the line in discharging their duties.