

May Day: Workers urged to compete globally
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi urged the country's workforce to be more competitive and move towards a knowledge-based economy, in comments today marking May Day.

Abdullah said Malaysia's ability to compete in the face of increasing regional competition hinged on the quality and productivity of its workers.

"The country needs trained and skilled workers in various fields and the need is escalating in line with the trend toward a knowledge-economy," he said, adding that "Malaysia cannot continue to depend on cheap labour cost."

Abdullah, who took over as premier in 2003, has introduced a broad economic plan with less reliance on the labour-intensive construction and manufacturing sectors - traditionally the cornerstone of the country's economy.

He said Malaysia's goal of becoming a developed nation needs the commitment of workers, "to equip themselves with the characteristics and attitude of a society with first-class mentality."

Top opposition lawmaker Lim Kit Siang said that despite promises by the government to invest more in developing human capital, the condition of workers was largely unchanged.

"The economy has moved towards a knowledge-based economy but it is not because of the prime minister's leadership. There are still no major changes in labour laws," Lim said.

"All the talk about developing human capital has yet to bring about meaningful changes to improve the standard of living of workers in reality, who are faced with ever-increasing living costs," he said.

RM900 minimum wage

Malaysia's main trade union group said today it would campaign for a minimum wage of RM900 per month for Malaysian workers.

The Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), in its May Day message, said wage rates in most workplaces did not keep up with economic growth and the consumer price index.

"Workers see the globalisation process being used as an excuse to keep wage levels low ... and remove job security through outsourcing and contracting," said MTUC secretary general G Rajasekaran.

Rajasekaran said large numbers of permanent workers were being enticed with voluntary retrenchment schemes, which offered some incentive payment for resigning, to allow employers to replace them with cheaper foreign labour.

Malaysia is one of Asia's largest importers of labour, with foreign workers both legal and illegal making up about 2.6 million of the country's 10.5 million workforce.

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