

LABOUR PANGS

IN A MEMORANDUM for the dialogue session on Budget 1992, the Malayan Trades Union Congress (MTUC) voices out many areas of concern that it wants addressed: employment and quality of working life, environment and recreation, health and safety, human resources development, social opportunities such as house ownership, participation and administration of justice such as price increase justification, and more equitable income taxation.

One big issue has to do with migrant labour. To ensure that wages and working conditions of Malaysian workers are not adversely affected, employment of foreign migrant workers, especially illegal workers, should be discouraged, says Dr V David, MTUC secretary-general. 'We welcome the announcement of the human resources minister that a levy should be imposed on employers for the employment of foreign migrant workers,' he adds.

According to him, the levy will discourage the mass employment of foreign workers. The MTUC proposes that a monthly levy of 250 rgt for the employment of each foreign migrant worker, and any employer who defaults in payment should be fined 10,000 rgt/worker and /or jailed for a period of six months.

David is concerned how this proposal would be taken and implemented. He says local employers are in a 'mad rush' to employ foreign workers, particularly in the plantation sector for a very simple reason: cost reduction. Their strategy he says is to cry labour 'shortage' and seek the government's approval to allow them to employ migrant labour.

But he says there is no labour shortage here in Malaysia. With the national unemployment rate hovering at around 7 per cent, the shortage of labour may not be real. Instead David attributes the cause to be low wage levels and unsatisfactory working conditions. 'There are still estates in the Klang Valley that are without electricity and clean drinking water,' stresses he. 'And that's in the Klang Valley. Can you imagine what the conditions would be outside the Klang Valley?'

He claims that there are currently more than 1 million migrants in Malaysia, with 95 per cent made up by Indonesians. 'Economic growth and industrial development would be hollow if they are based on a cheap migrant labour force and not on a local labour force that is paid reasonable wages and given fair working conditions,' reckons David. As for wage increase in the plantation sector, David says that it is currently far from adequate. 'Over a period of three years, there's only a 3 to 5 per cent increase,' he says. 'For a family of five to live reasonably, there should be a monthly income of at least 600 rgt.'

The MTUC has also proposed a review of the government's investment priorities. 'Malaysia has reached the stage where she should be selective of the type of investments she want to attract,' David says. 'Malaysia should not select investments with a higher level of technology but also worker- and environment-friendly investments.'