

**ADDRESS BY HON. DR VASANT K. BUNWAREE
MINISTER OF LABOUR, INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS &
EMPLOYMENT**

MAURITIUS EMPLOYERS' FEDERATION

46th Annual General Meeting

Date: Wednesday 26 March 2008

Time: 10hr00

*Venue: MEF – MCCI Bldg
Ebène Cybercity
Ebène*

Hon. Dharam Gokhool, Minister of Education & Human Resources

Mr Mookeshwarsing Gopal, Chairman of Mauritius Employers' Federation

Dr Azad Jeetun, Director of Mauritius Employers' Federation

Dear Council Members

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am indeed extremely pleased to address delegates and guests of Mauritius Employers Federation on the occasion of its **46th Annual General Meeting**. I am thankful to the Chairman and the Director of Mauritius Employers' Federation for associating me again with this important annual event.

Since its inception in 1962, forty-six years ago, the Mauritius Employers' Federation has emerged as the recognized voice of employers and the private sector in our country. It has always been considered as a very important partner and stakeholder of the government in the consultation process on major and vital economic and social policies that will shape the future destiny of Mauritius.

Ladies and gentlemen, such factors as globalisation, intense competition between countries and enterprises, the advent of new technologies, have caused many issues and subjects to become priority concerns, not only of the government, but of Employers organisations, as well.

The MEF, as an important partner and stakeholder, should also reflect Government's concerns on issues like –**poverty alleviation, health and improved working environment and conditions, practice of tripartism, and the creation of a national and enterprise-level framework and environment conducive to sound employment relations.**

The rapid pace of change implies that employers organisations have to adjust quickly to meet new needs. I am happy to note that the MEF is responding very well as regards the emerging challenges and in meeting the new needs of its members and of the country.

Globalisation is, indeed, compelling us - the government as well as Employers organisations, to focus on the following, amongst others:

- transforming conflictual relations into cooperative ones;
- sound workplace employment relations as a key to productivity enhancement;
- flexible work arrangements without affecting security of employment;
- employee development, especially in terms of skills training;
- workplace health programmes.
- workers participation and profit-sharing schemes;
- corporate social responsibility and good governance.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Industrial Relations System is steadily moving away from its traditional “adversarial” nature to the wider concept of Human Resource Management with both workers and employers increasingly working together to achieve enterprise objectives for their mutual benefits. This is both a challenge as well as an opportunity for Employer’s organisations such as the MEF. It is a field where you have to play a more pro-active role, as technology and capital becoming more accessible, **the real competitive advantage of enterprises will lie in the quality and skills of the workforce.**

Related to the concept of human resource management is the recognition of the close co-relation between education, skills development, and economic growth. Education and training are, therefore, areas where the Mauritius Employers Federation should continue to play an increasingly pro-active role. The MEF, in this regard, could still strengthen its partnership and link arrangements between enterprises and educational and training institutions.

Here, I would like to place on record the crucial and important role being played by MEF with relevant education authorities so that academic and training curricula have a practical and work-oriented focus in order **to address the problems of mismatch.**

Ladies and gentlemen, safe and healthy working environment is a precondition for long-term development. It is a known fact that timely efforts of employers to eliminate inappropriate and harmful working conditions prevent far more expensive long-term negative impact on human health. **The least I expect from every employer – is to comply with the requirements stemming from the Occupational Safety & Health Act; and that every effort is made to ensure a healthy and friendly working environment.**

Although, the overall statistics show that there is a decrease in the number of industrial injuries, still we need to give particular attention to some risk-sectors like construction, agriculture, manufacturing and transport.

Health is an important element in the quality of life of an individual, as well as of the quality of human capital which is our primary economic resource. I need not mention its direct relation to enhanced productivity. Health should therefore be developed, promoted and protected by means of organised social actions, not only as a fundamental human right but also as a way of support for development of human resources.

According to the ILO, “**there is an urgent need to move the focus of the attention beyond the impact that family demands have on work, to the impact that work and working conditions have on family and personal life and to gender equality**”. In this connection, my Ministry intends to embark on a very ambitious project relating to “**Changing Lifestyle and Santé au Travail**”, the success of which depends on the collective support of all stakeholders and particularly the employers. Additionally, I would appeal to the MEF to support the **introduction of a Workplace Health Programme**, worth its name, at least in the big enterprises in the first instance.

Such Workplace Health Programmes will be beneficial not only for the workers but the country as well particularly in terms of enhanced productivity and savings that would accrue on health costs which otherwise, would have had to be spent on treatment of diseases. The ultimate aim is a healthy population with a healthy workforce.

A healthy workforce is the driving force of a prosperous economy. **Workers spend more than a third of their working hours on average at work; the workplace is now being used as a platform to implement strategies on the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases.** Not later than last week, I attended an international workshop organised by the Geneva Social Observatory on “**The Development of a Workplace Strategy on the Prevention and Treatment of Diabetes**”. There have been very fruitful discussions and it is expected that in the final report, clear-cut strategies that are best suited for prevention and treatment of diabetes at workplaces will be elaborated upon.

Ladies and gentlemen, the government has made **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)** a policy focus and the need of CSR has also been stressed in the last Government Budget. Due to setting-up of new businesses in the financial sector, the Tourism Sector, ICT and other emerging industries, it is expected that the corporate sector will expand considerably while economic power will deepen and thus increasing their impact on social development and the environment.

There are growing demands for enterprises to be accountable to the community and other stakeholders. Social responsibility, whose main aim is to contribute to sustainable development, health and the welfare of society at large, is increasingly becoming one of the important influences on an organisation’s performance.

I strongly believe that social responsibility should be an integral part of the enterprise’s structure, culture and identity. In this regard, the Mauritius Employers’ Federation could play a vital and determining role to create awareness on what social responsibility of the company is really about, and also help towards **obtaining a meaningful engagement** on the part of its members on corporate social responsibility.

Budgets earmarked by enterprises for corporate social responsibility should be utilized to implement projects, not only at national level, but also in the immediate locality of the enterprise. **Health, education, environment protection, poverty alleviation, sports, entertainment and leisure are areas in which private sector enterprises could contribute effectively under-clear-cut and well-defined social responsibility plans.** Corporate social responsibility initiatives could also be directed towards infrastructural improvements and the development of villages and other localities.

The Sugar Industry, amongst others, has a long history of corporate social responsibility initiatives and projects in the area of community development. I believe the **Mauritius Employers Federation** could play a very significant and crucial role to ensure that as many of its members operating in all the sectors of the economy, could come up with a well-defined CSR plan. With effective implementation of the relevant projects, corporate social responsibility will have maximum impact on economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the local community and the society at large.

Ladies and gentlemen, the **employment of foreign workers has emerged as a major phenomenon in our country. The employment and labour sector realities in our country are such that foreign workers are called upon to play a major role in the development of several important sectors of the economy.** However, complaints have occasionally been made to my Ministry regarding non-compliance to relevant labour provisions by some employers regarding foreign workers.

Some of these cases have also been reported in the local press and abroad as well. As responsible partners, we must be deeply concerned with the adverse publicity which is bound to tarnish the image of the country.

In this regard, I again appeal to the MEF for its support to ensure that the needful is done for maximum protection of these workers. Foreign workers should be able to enjoy the same status as their mauritian counterparts. As any responsible country, we should show our commitment towards respecting the rights and privileges of foreign workers as well. Necessary provisions have been provided, and if necessary will be further strengthened in our relevant Labour Laws with a view to give maximum protection to foreign workers.

Having said this, I must also mention that complaints have also occasionally being received regarding ill-treatment of Mauritian workers by certain expatriates employed at managerial level in enterprises. This is also, when confirmed, not acceptable and I will call upon the MEF and employers in general to see to it that such cases do not occur.

I must tell you that Government is seriously considering to introduce the obligation for such expatriates before they start employment, to undergo an induction course to familiarize themselves with the specificities of our working culture and constitutional and legal rights of our citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you are aware that the exercise being undertaken to review the Labour Legislation with a view to adapting it to the new economic environment, has reached a crucial stage. Since the release of the two draft bills in August 2007, frank and meaningful consultations have been continuously held. This has been confirmed by the ILO, following the workshop organized by my Ministry in collaboration with ILO, early this year.

Concurrently, actions are being pursued to reinforce the mechanism on social dialogue. In this context, following a request by my Ministry, ILO has agreed to hold a Tripartite Workshop on social dialogue during this year.

Ladies and gentlemen, MEF, along with the workers' representatives, have been and will always remain major partners of my Ministry. I am confident that I can always rely on the full support of the employers in our effort of formulating and implementing best strategies for the promotion of harmonious industrial relations.

Before concluding, I wish the MEF and its members forever success in the achievement of their objectives.

I thank you for your attention.