State of the union

It is clear that while there is an increase in the number of trade unions, the increase is greatest among unions with small memberships,” said a former UPM senior lecturer. For example, 246 trade unions had memberships of fewer than 5,000 in 1982, decreasing to 981 in 1997 and up again to 595 by 2003. During these two decades, the number of unions having over 5,000 members has shown only a very small increase, from 26 in 1982 to 28 in 2003. If anything, the trade union density in Malaysia has increased for the vast majority of workers the "muscular yet equitable" backup most needed during claims for improved living conditions and competitive wage regimes. From 9.35% it dropped to 9.24% in 1995 and 7.87% just around the new millennium (Please refer to table above).

In 2004, the density was according to the Department of Statistics, around 7.84% and despite a slight increase to 8.9% in 2002, the density had in fact seen an overall decline in subsequent years with 7.8% in 2006.

Sarasundaram, in his own evaluation of trade union density, says that out of the current 11.4 million workers in the country (minus the 2 million migrant workers), only around 7% are unionised. That amounts to a paltry 800,000 workers.

This is the second of a three-part article on trade unions in Malaysia. The final part will be published next week.