

Hong Kong workers flock to labour unions as new protest tactic

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Before the Hong Kong protests began in June, Chris Ngai spent most of his free time playing World of Warcraft and finding new cocktail recipes. Now the bespectacled 24-year-old junior engineer is launching a trade union.

His aim is to ramp up pressure on Hong Kong's government, which has so far made no political concessions to protesters' demands for greater democracy in the Chinese-ruled city, despite millions of people marching in the street.

"The ongoing (anti-government) movement has fundamentally changed people's lives," Ngai told Reuters, the day before he set up a booth along the route of a Jan 1 march, to sign up new members. *"It has forced many who were ignorant about society to stand up."*

As violent clashes with police become more common, the anti-government movement has reached a point of *"anger and hopelessness,"* said Ngai, and needs new tactics.

Ngai said he and his team persuaded about 90 engineers, architects and construction workers to join his **Hong Kong Construction and Engineering Employees General Union** in the past month. His booth was only one of dozens along the 4km route of the New Year's Day march, each with a distinct flag and logo, attracting queues of hundreds of people to join **new unions for civil servants, hotel staff, theatre professionals and others.**

Ngai and his fellow organizers are spearheading the biggest push to unionise the laissez-faire, ultra-capitalist finance mecca - where collective bargaining rights are not even recognised - since Britain handed the city back to China in 1997.

They are also at the forefront of the ever-experimenting Hong Kong anti-government movement as it looks for more elective forms of protest.

"The movement has been thriving on its ad-hoc character," said **Ma Ngok**, a political scientist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. *"Now more people think the movement may be a long haul, so they need a more organised base to sustain it."*

About 40 unions, including Ngai's, have formed in recent months or are in the process of registering with the government, **with dozens more starting to organise**, according to the **Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU).**

The confederation, which last month started running crash courses on establishing unions, said **about 2,000 people have already joined unions this year and thousands more joined in late 2019.** The city has a population of about 7.4 million.

Labour Department records show that **25 new unions registered last year, compared to 13 in 2018.** Of those, 18 formed in the second half of the year, as protests escalated.

Like many new protest tactics, the call to unionise first spread via the encrypted messaging app Telegram, where a channel promoting labour organisation has grown to more than 74,000 subscribers in less than three months.

'TIME TO STRIKE'

Traditional unions in Hong Kong are seen by citizens primarily as clubs for hobby classes, banquets and retail discounts.

The new unions are motivated more by protecting workers from being punished by employers for expressing their views.

About two months after protests began in June over a now-withdrawn Bill that would have allowed extraditions of suspected criminals to China, protesters got a wake-up call on Beijing's powers of coercion. The mainland's aviation regulator demanded Hong Kong's flag carrier Cathay Pacific suspend staff involved in or supporting demonstrations.

Many new unionists say the problem is widespread, especially where bosses are keen to avoid conflict with China for fear of damaging business.

A 26-year-old woman who identified herself as Cynthia told Reuters she heard of an **auditing firm** that hastily organised a lunch for all employees at the same time as a large protest which many of her fellow professionals wanted to attend during their break. She described that as "*oppression*" and said it was one of the reasons she is helping to establish the **Accounting Bro'Sis Labour Union**.

Some employees have been reprimanded for expressing political views on their personal Facebook accounts, said Gary Chan, secretary of the **Hong Kong Financial Industry Employees General Union**, which he said has recruited 160 members since late September.

Programmer Alex Tang said his newly formed, 280-member **Hong Kong Information Technology Workers' Union** was developing a database of employers who would not threaten or dismiss staff for supporting protests.

Many believe unions will provide safety in numbers.

"If we strike as individuals, we may be suppressed by companies," said a 23-year-old assistant architect surnamed Lam, who was lining up at Ngai's booth, wearing a black face mask, on Jan 1.

The drive to unionise comes as Hong Kong is grappling with a recession as tourist numbers and retail sales decline in the face of violent protests.

While the new unions cannot promise much in terms of immediate economic benefits, **they may in time be able to organise more effective strikes and address the city's deep inequalities, said Eli Friedman**, an associate professor at Cornell University who studies labour in China.

"It's too soon to tell if they will get the union density to exercise that kind of power," said Friedman.

Many new union leaders say they recognise that gaining members and changing cultural attitudes to unions will take time.

But they are committed to improving workers' rights, with a long-term goal of organising mass strikes to increase pressure on the government to allow everyone the right to vote for the city's leader.

"It's a numbers game," said **Lee Cheuk-yan, general secretary of HKCTU** and a former politician. *"We have to stay organised in the long run and consolidate the consciousness of the people of Hong Kong that has arisen over the past half-year,"* Lee said. **"All of the unions will decide together when it is time to strike."**

P.S.

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