

# Hong Kong Dockworkers strike continues into 4<sup>th</sup> week despite management attacks

Friday 26 April 2013, by [AU Loong-yu](#), [BAI Ruixue](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2013).

**The first version we received of this article was not final, so we are replacing it by the good one...**

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The strike by around 450 dockworkers at Hong Kong International Terminals (HIT) to demand for higher wages, which began almost one month ago, continues into its fourth week as management still refuse to offer the workers the pay that they demand. The workers, who earn less today than they did in 1995, are asking for a pay rise of 23% an amount which does not even bring their wages back in line with what they were paid 18 years ago if inflation is also taken into account. The dockworkers wages have fallen since outsourcing was introduced. Their employers have only so far offered a wage rise of just 5% plus 2% rise in fringe benefits however.

Many of the workers have to endure terrible working conditions at the port. Adrian, a striking crane operator in his late twenties described the conditions as follows:

*“Normally we need to work for 24 hours. So that means a day. And also we sometimes need to work overtime. So that means 48 to 72 hours non-stop. And we don’t have time to take our meals or go to the toilet. And if you are a crane operator, like me, you need to eat, pee and poo inside the crane cabin. This is disgusting. So you can imagine how bad the condition is.”*

Asked about why the workers had decided to take action now he answered, “Actually we have been standing for this for more than 10 years. We can’t stand it anymore now. And they are still telling us how much they earn every year. But our salary didn’t increase at all.”

The rising costs of living and widening gaps between rich and poor have increased the burden of workers in Hong Kong. Meanwhile Mr Wu, a striking tally clerk, who has previously been on strike twice before in 1998 and in 1995, had the following comments to make:

*“This is a world where the weak are prey to the strong. Today the boss might give you ten dollars, tomorrow eight dollars. We have the chance so we must resist, and although we cannot say that we will definitely succeed, resisting now can at least act as a deterrent. Otherwise life will be more difficult later. I am afraid that there will be riots in Hong Kong if it carries on like this. The prices today are more expensive. Even a jin of vegetables costs more than 20 dollars. In the colonial era we didn’t even have to spend a dollar to see a doctor. But now you have to spend 100 dollars no matter whether something is the matter or not. Li Ka-Shing is the richest man in Hong Kong. When the poor can no longer support themselves they will become so angry that anything could happen. We do this not only for ourselves but also for all wage earners and more so for the next generation. Imagine if your child was also in this situation, what hope would there be for society? These tycoons will never*

be satisfied with the amount of money they make. Their annual income is more than 3 billion dollars, but the operation cost should only be 700 million, so where has the rest of the money gone?"

The workers, who when they originally began the strike occupied the container terminal, following a court injunction (although 80 strikers are still allowed by the court to enter the port to lobby their co-workers) have been camping outside the terminals. Last week with negotiations seeming to be going nowhere, workers escalated their action and set up an additional camp outside of the Cheung Kong Centre, the headquarters of Hong Kong's richest man Li Ka-Shing, whose company holds the largest share of Hutchison Whampoa, the parent company of HIT. They have also held protest actions outside of Li Ka-Shing's house.

According to the workers, they have been considering striking for more than six months and had previously warned the companies that they work for that if they were not given a pay rise then they would go on strike. The management did not take them seriously and so finally they went on strike. Nevertheless the decision to strike around Easter, during the low season, was a deliberate decision on the part of the workers to show their good will. "I think we need to tell them we are friendly. Let's talk when the season is low," explained Adrian. One trade unionist that we spoke to commented on this tactic and contrasted it to the iron binding workers' strike in 2007 in which workers were much more militant from the very beginning (possibly a result of the combined factors of their tradition and the kind of workers this industry employs) and had a picket line to stop employers from hiring scabs. The dockworkers this time have not tried this however and as the lack of progress in negotiations shows, the employers have not returned the workers good will. On the contrary, they have only so far made a miserable pay increase offer and have also sought to vilify the workers and their union.

Many of the striking dock workers are members of the Union of Hong Kong Dockworkers and are also being represented by the pro-democracy Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU). Nevertheless, the pro-Beijing Federation of Trade Unions (FTU), as well as the pro-establishment Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions have also been interfering in the strike negotiations despite not representing any of the striking workers. Indeed their interventions have been nothing but harmful to the strikers. One might question if their actual intention is to break the strike. Already on the first day of negotiations meetings with the workers' representatives from the CTU and dock workers union was cut short so that separate negotiations could be held with the FTU in the afternoon. In addition the 12% pay rise which the FTU is asking for is far below what the workers are demanding and is little better than that already offered by management. According to one worker the FTU's actions "means that they are standing on the bosses' side, not the workers side...there is no reason for us to support them". The FTU, like the mainland ACFTU to which it has links, has a poor record in defending workers rights. In the 2007 iron binding workers strike (which lasted for 36 days) the FTU affiliate tried to force a deal with the employer association onto the workers. This deal was entirely rejected by the striking workers, however, who continued to strike until they won. Meanwhile in another example of mainland political interests compromising the efforts of the CTU, the ACFTU, according to the Apple Daily, put pressure on the ILO to prevent a delegate from the Hong Kong CTU from speaking on the implementation of the minimum wage in Hong Kong at an international meeting on wage policy held in Bali last week. Instead the delegate was only allowed to raise questions.

The striking workers have also expressed anger at the government's handling of the dispute and on Monday of this week they marched on the office of the Labour Secretary. Adrian, the striking crane operator, previously expressed his surprise at the government's failure to do anything. Dismissing all negotiations so far as "just talk", he makes the following comment; "The strange thing is I still don't understand why the government hasn't taken any action. This is the most strange part of the strike. They didn't talk at all. And didn't help. So what actually are the rich and the government doing? We

don't know."

The strike has attracted a high degree of local and international support. In the last few weeks students and local activist groups have offered a lot of support to the strikers, collecting strike funds, taking part in marches and also organising a boycott of Li Ka-Shing's supermarket chain Park 'n' Shop. One of the workers camping outside the Cheung Kong Centre said that even staff working inside the centre had donated money to them. Dock worker unions from around the world have also shown their solidarity with the striking workers in Hong Kong by sending donations and letters and statements of solidarity supporting the strikers.

While the strike has not been able to shut the docks down completely, the striking workers only comprise approximately 27% of the total workforce at the docks; the strike has had a definite impact on port operations, with cargo being directed to ports elsewhere. Meanwhile the management has been keen to downplay the impact of the strike, for instance by paying truck drivers extra money to drive empty trucks around the port to make it look busy and by operating the cranes without actually loading or unloading cargos so that it gives the illusion that they are working, when in fact they are not.

Although the striking workers have made attempts to persuade other workers at the docks to join to expand the strike this has mostly met with little success. Some workers mentioned difficulties in talking to other workers, particularly workers from Southeast Asia due to language barriers. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, the strikers have not set up a picket line to try to stop scabs. However they still feel that they have some bargaining power as the scabs that have been hired mostly work on the ground and many of the strikers are crane operators, a job which requires two months prior training, meaning that it is difficult to replace them so quickly.

Towards the end of last week, one of the two contractors that have been involved in the negotiations with the striking workers, Global Stevedoring Service Company Limited, announced that it will not be renewing its service contract after it expires at the end of June. Workers and the trade unions have nevertheless stressed that they are not worried by this development and that it will not deter the strikers taking action. Several of the workers have commented on how they remain determined and their morale is high. "I think we can hold on for a long time until we get what we want, otherwise we won't stop" explained crane worker Adrian.

**Bai Ruixue and Au Loong yu**

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\* China Labor Net: <http://www.worldlabour.org/eng/>

\* The authors are editorial board members of the China Labour Net.