

Hong Kong, The Transformation of Traditional Trade Unions: From 'Wage-Claiming Machine' to Combining Strength for Three-Front Strike

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Until today, organizing a 'three-front' strike (work, classes, the markets) is a challenge yet to be overcome in the protests that have been going on in Hong Kong. Employees from different industries have begun to explore the **trade union as a means of gathering forces** in the marketplace. **Trade unions are being set up one after another, in hopes to unite workers in different industries.**

At the same time, traditional democratic trade unions are tasting a breath of fresh air brought by new blood who joined in.

The Construction Site Workers General Union (Construction Site Union hereafter) was established in **1992**. Members come from different fields of construction work, including plastering, formwork erection among others. The Construction Site Union hereafter and Bar Bending Industry Workers Solidarity Union are both affiliated to **HKCTU**. Two officers are employed by the HKCTU to carry out administrative duties, advocacy work, and casework for the two unions.

Besides working in precarious environments, construction workers frequently face labour disputes due to the outsourcing system.

The end of the year is usually the peak season for defaulting on salaries. On this day in December, officers and 18 electricians of the Construction Site Union gathered at a construction site at Tai Wan MTR Station to lodge claims on holiday pay and wages in lieu of notice.

"Not a lot of people know that construction workers are entitled to holiday pay," Delphine, an officer of the Construction Site Union stated. "Some heads of companies say to workers, 'we are construction workers, and guild regulations say that we don't offer (holiday pay). You are just a day worker, and you're paid daily, why would you want any holiday pay?' And they tell workers off. But the bosses should refer to the Labour Legislation and the Employment Ordinance, which clearly states that if one meets the '418 rule' (being employed continuously by the same employer for four weeks or more, with at least 18 hours worked in each week) for three months, one is entitled to paid annual leave and statutory holidays. This is legal protection to workers' rights, written in black and white. No guild regulations can override that."

These campaigns are opportunities for the Construction Site Union to recruit new members. **The Union now has 500 members.** Part of them joined in during labour disputes.

Kin, an affected worker, is one of them. *"I don't have any ways to recover my wages by myself. I*

don't know which government department to go to. If I go to the Labour Department, there are probably many procedures. I can't be sure if I can recover my wages so quickly. But if the trade union helps, it'll be much more organized, and we are much clearer in our goal and more much united. We will recover our outstanding wages more quickly." He said.

Union officers: wage-claiming machines?

Most campaigns taken on by the Construction Site Union are to recover outstanding wages. In the past year, excluding the dispute at Tai Wai Station, there were 14 blockages of construction sites, and 136 hearings in court. Wages totalling more than 35 million for more than 1 000 workers were recovered.

Such "glorious" victories do not necessarily mean that workers will stay and participate in the trade union.

May, another officer of the Union, makes fun of herself for being like a 'wage-claiming machine'.
"Sometimes we see workers' transformation after we help them recover their wages. We always say that we want to be able to transform our efforts on labour rights onto social issues and contribute to the social movement.

But it has always been hard. Many workers join in the trade union purely because they want help with dealing with disputes. So we always joke that we are wage-claiming machines."

"Last year, we had a dozen cases on labour disputes. But the process of transformation after claiming wages for the workers is difficult. Some workers have different political stances to us and these differences are not addressed from the beginning.

*But in the future...actually, even in the past two or three disputes, we met workers who are passionately involved in social issues. **We hope that trade unions will not only be fighting for labour rights but will play an essential role in social movements.**"*

The politicization of workers and trade unions

On New Year's day, the Construction Site Union not only joined in the march but also set up a street counter along the route of the march.

Chung, a worker, joined the Union last year when he was taking classes for the Civil & Building Trade Tests. He then joined in a few campaigns fighting for workers' rights. Since June, he has actively participated in the Union, hoping to launch an industry-wide strike.

"There are too many 'blue-ribbons' (pro-beijing) and 'neutral' people in our industry. It's hard to expect a strike from them. I think this Union can help because it draws a lot of people in. I want to help because I want to see the strike happen.

A strike is a relatively peaceful way to fight for the five demands. I don't want to see more people sacrifice themselves. We saw what happened at the Chinese University and Polytechnic University. Too many young people are sacrificing themselves," he said.

May continued to say, *"Some workers raised questions during our recent discussion. What do we expect the trade union to achieve? One question we get often, for example, is why are their wages are always overdue. The problem is with the whole system, so how does the system need to change? Then we're back to discussing policies. And policies are intertwined with politics. In the past, trade unions focused on labour rights, but in fact, there needs to be balanced efforts on both labour rights and social issues. Politically, I think workers and trade unions can have more participation."*

The emergence of new trade unions not only serves as a firm foundation for the three-front strike. It helps open up a new era of the labour movement.

We shall wait expectantly to see how will new and old trade unions work together on labour issues.

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P.S.

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https://radicalhk.com/2020/01/04/oldschool/?fbclid=IwAR25fnoCMUJRXJ3A4uu5g2y_ORGB23_xUIUMcARbHf3UHzoGVWBGjvIufYw

English version

<https://en.hkctu.org.hk/content/transformation-traditional-trade-unions-wage-claiming-machine-combining-strength-three-front>