

How did Hong Kong's largest teachers' union enrage Beijing and what's next for the opposition group after severed ties with government?

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Education Bureau revealed it was cutting official ties with the Professional Teachers' Union, which authorities accuse of inciting anti-government violence among students, staff.

Founded in 1974, Hong Kong's biggest single-profession trade union is seen as the last surviving stronghold of city's embattled opposition movement.

Hong Kong's Education Bureau dropped a bombshell by revealing it was **severing official ties with the city's biggest teachers' union, a 95,000-strong body** widely seen as the last power base within the embattled opposition camp.(1)

Saturday's move by the bureau came within hours of two Communist Party mouthpieces calling the Professional Teachers' Union (PTU) a "*malignant tumour*", and saying it had to be eradicated for inciting staff and students to commit violent and illegal acts during anti-government protests.

The Post explores the background behind the saga, laying out how the 47-year-old organisation emerged as a thorn in Beijing's side that could no longer be tolerated, and the impact on the wider education sector.

How powerful is the Professional Teachers' Union in Hong Kong?

Founded in **1974** by late democracy icon Szeto Wah, the PTU is **the largest trade union for a single profession** in Hong Kong.

Strength in numbers aside, the union enjoys large fiscal reserves, as well as a financial position that stands in stark contrast to opposition political parties and groups, all thanks to Szeto's entrepreneurial eye.

Szeto realised upon setting up the organisation that it was impractical for the union to maintain a close relationship with its large number of members solely through profession-related activities, and so he established a so-called welfare branch to sell essential and other goods to them at discounted

prices.

Initially only stocking electric pots, herbal drinks and cake vouchers, the union's businesses have gradually expanded to two massive supermarkets in Mong Kok and Causeway Bay, two of the city's busiest shopping districts. The mega stores sold not only groceries and stationery but also books and home appliances.

It also ran several health clinics, providing discounted medical check-ups and services in areas such as dental, optometry and physiotherapy.

The union's annual turnover stands at HK\$300 million (US\$38.6 million).

Szeto also believed that financial independence was key to sustaining the union's development, setting the goal of buying its own premises so it did not have to live under monetary or political pressure from landlords.

It now owns properties in Good Hope Building and Chung Kiu Commercial Building, both in Mong Kok, and in Wing Tak Mansion, Causeway Bay.

In April, the union spent HK\$59 million buying three commercial building units in San Po Kong.

What is PTU's role in the city's opposition movement?

Szeto was also the co-founder of the **Democratic Party** and the **Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China**, the latter of which organised the annual candlelight vigil commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.

Over the years, with its huge membership base, wealth of resources and sophisticated organisation, the PTU had played a critical role in facilitating Hong Kong's democratic movement, according to political scientist Ivan Choy Chi-keung.

"The PTU is the only union in the pan-democratic bloc which has very strong organisational power. It can effectively disseminate messages to members, offering substantial support to the movement," said PTU member Choy, of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

He recalled how his own university department used to have a union representative in charge of collecting membership fees and delivering messages. *"Such a refined level of organisation is not seen in other opposition unions,"* he said.

The union's property portfolio can also offer convenient venues for other civil rights groups or alliances to hold internal meetings, training sessions or press conferences.

When did the government's relationship with the PTU turn sour?

Officials noted that as early as 2014 the union had published teaching resources for members with content on civil disobedience. They said the resources introduced to students the idea of the Occupy movement, which that year paralysed parts of the city for 79 days.

The union earlier defended the resources, saying they included views from other political parties and fostered academic discussion.

Authorities also slammed the union for staging school boycotts during the 2019 protests.

They further accused the group of *"promoting books that glorify violence"* following media reports the union's bookstore in Mong Kok was selling literature documenting the social unrest.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, who once visited the union to lobby for their support in the 2017 chief executive election, on Monday said the 2019 protests – sparked by the since-withdrawn extradition bill – were the turning point.

She accused the union of trying to influence pupils by spreading “*anti-government*” or “*anti-Beijing*” sentiment when thousands of students were joining illegal protests and a number of teachers were being arrested for their participation in them.

The city’s leader also said this week that the time had passed for any “*rational discussions*” between the government and the union.

Responding to the state media commentaries, the PTU dismissed accusations it had “*incited pupils to protest*”, adding it consistently opposed the notion of Hong Kong independence. But the group has not responded to Lam’s accusations.

The Hong Kong government over the decades has maintained a working relationship with the PTU despite its political stance, given the union’s unparalleled membership base.

In 2018, Lam attended a PTU reception celebrating the organisation’s 45th anniversary. “*It is not just a union fighting for [labour] welfare. It also has a lot of opinions on education in Hong Kong with a view to improve it,*” she said in a speech at the time.

At the beginning of her term, Lam also announced a HK\$5 billion allocation of recurrent funding to the education sector, an initiative welcomed by the PTU.

Did the PTU see the crackdown coming?

The union is fully aware it has been in the cross hairs, according to an insider.

“We know we are the last large-scale organisation standing in the camp which has both resources and manpower. I can’t think of any reason for the authorities to go soft on us amid the crackdown,” the union source said.

It is understood that over the past year the PTU has taken measures to protect itself by “*keeping the union just as a union*”. Lying low, it is inclined not to field any candidates for the Legislative Council elections this December for the first time in its history.

Its announcement last month to quit the Hong Kong alliance amid the “worsening political situation” was actually part of the precautions. But to the union’s surprise the move caught the authorities’ attention – and backfired.

What will be the biggest impact from the government’s new approach?

After cutting ties, the bureau will no longer regard the union as a professional body, and will neither engage in any formal or informal meetings with it, nor take its opinions on matters pertaining to the sector.

Officials will also temporarily stop looking into any cases referred by the union, and will review its advisory bodies and other groups with an eye to removing members representing the PTU.

Currently, PTU members have representatives on two bodies: the Council on Professional Conduct in Education, which advises the government on cases involving disputes or alleged professional misconduct, and the Education Commission, which advises the minister on overall education policies.

A PTU insider said he expected little difference even if their members were unseated because the government had long ignored their views during the current political atmosphere.

But the union was concerned that **the bureau would stop handling cases referred by them**.

Of the 3,000 cases government officials dealt with annually, a source said fewer than 10 per cent

were politically sensitive, with the rest being labour disputes.

"We are experienced and have established procedures in assisting the teachers and dealing with the bureau, such a role cannot be easily replaced," he said.

The source also questioned if their biggest competitor, the pro-Beijing Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers (HKFEW) could plug the gaps given it was a limited company. Under existing legislation, only unions can represent their clients in labour disputes.

HKFEW president Wong Kwan-yu, also a local delegate to the National People's Congress, admitted the federation faced limitations when handling labour disputes, and revealed talks were ongoing to form a union.

Education chief Kevin Yeung Yun-hung weighed in on Tuesday and called on teachers to flag complaints to the bureau directly, saying there was no need for a middleman.

What's the future of the PTU?

On Tuesday, city leader Lam refused to say whether the union would be outlawed and whether it was currently under investigation by any law enforcement agencies, only indicating that banning a group would require solid legal grounds and sufficient evidence.

Former chief executive Leung Chun-ying, known for his combative approach towards the union, urged authorities to go after its leadership and investigate all *"anti-China"* members he said were hiding in schools.

In an email sent to all members on Tuesday 27, **PTU president Fung Wai-wah** said the union had decided earlier this week that from now on it would focus its work on the education profession and do its best to function as a union, offering those in the group diversified welfare.

One secondary school teacher, a PTU member of more than 30 years, said he had not yet decided whether to quit the union. He said the PTU typically required membership renewal every September, at which point he suspected a number of teachers would decide to leave.

"But within a WhatsApp group set up by the PTU a few years ago for an event, many teachers have quit the group recently ... citing reasons including the chat group having been idle for a while," he said.

The secondary school teacher added that he did not feel *"too worried"* at the moment, although some in the profession feared a worst-case scenario could involve the PTU having to shut down in the way Apple Daily newspaper had stopped publishing following a crackdown.

"The authorities could freeze its assets, meaning it would not be able to pay its staff members, and eventually be forced to cease operation," he explained.

Additional reporting by Chan Ho-him

Note ESSF :

1. PTU represents about 65% of the membership of HKCTU, the central union to which PTU is affiliated.

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