

Hong Kong protests: why trade unions have mushroomed as demonstrators push for workers' rights

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For years, the city's labour movement has been dominated by pro-Beijing voices deeply supportive of the government.

But the demonstrations lay the groundwork for employees in dozens of industries to organise, some for the first time.

Michael Ngan Mo-chau

Michael Ngan Mo-chau was a student leader at Chinese University (CUHK) in 2012 when he co-wrote an orientation booklet for freshmen, encouraging them to participate fully in activities on school governance and civil movements. He told them it was not good enough for them to sit on their hands while others spoke up.

"Your days in university will shape your thoughts and determine your future," wrote Ngan, then a final-year student in government and public administration. *"So treasure your time here and keep reflecting on yourself."*

While at university, Ngan helped to organise a boycott of classes to demand the scrapping of a citywide school curriculum aimed at nurturing patriotism. So his peers and teachers were not entirely surprised when, in July 2019, the 29-year-old civil servant initiated the first rally by government workers over the extradition bill crisis, risking the wrath of his employer.

A Labour Department officer, Ngan had faded from the social activism scene after graduation, and was the only student union leader from his year to join the civil service.

He had hoped the rally would provide those in the 180,000-strong civil service with a platform to express their views openly, after many had done so anonymously online.

Hundreds of administrative officers, executive officers and government lawyers had signed petitions and open letters urging the government to address the demands of protesters. They concealed their identities by showing photographs of their staff cards, with their faces and names covered. Some went a step further by taking part in protests, even at the front lines.

The rally, on August 2, drew an estimated 40,000 people, including thousands of ordinary Hongkongers, and went ahead despite Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung Kin-chung coming out hours before it was due to start to advise those on the public payroll not to *"do things in contrast with the government's views"*.

Ngan addressed the crowd that day, saying: *"It is not easy for civil servants, who are part of the establishment, to stand up. You can take away my identity as a civil servant, but not as a Hongkonger. Our future can be sacrificed, but not Hongkongers'."*

The rare protest by public servants deeply embarrassed the embattled government of Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor.

The head of the civil service, Joshua Law Chi-kong, said in an internal memo that civil servants had

to remain politically neutral and avoid giving the impression that the civil service opposed the government.

Beijing's Hong Kong-based mouthpieces Wen Wei Po and Ta Kung Pao published dozens of articles criticising Ngan, branding him a traitor.

None of that stopped Ngan from co-founding the Union for New Civil Servants in November 2019, or vowing to advance the interests of government employees and protect their right to express their views freely. One among the dozens of new unions set up in the wake of the protests, it began 2020 by accusing police of restricting Hongkongers' rights by ending the New Year's Day protest abruptly.

The government's reaction

The government warned the union against violating guidelines on impartiality that was demanded of the city's civil servants.

"The government calls on all civil servants to stay united in this difficult time, and continue to support the government's work to stamp out violence as a matter of top priority," it said. As of February 2020, the union had 3,000 members.

Former civil service secretary Joseph Wong Wing-ping, who helped draft the civil service code, said city leader Lam should have sensed the seriousness of the crisis when those working under her started to speak up in July 2019.

"Civil servants are supposed to be the most conservative group, inclined to back the government and long for social stability," he said. *"How can you be indifferent when they speak out?"*

He said the emergence of the new union was not necessarily a bad thing, but much depended on how Lam chose to perceive it - she could welcome the unionists' constructive opinion, or dismiss them as opposition forces.

As of February 29, 2020, 42 civil servants had been suspended for suspected involvement in *"unlawful public activities"* relating to the protests. In April, bureau chief Law was replaced by constitutional and mainland affairs minister Patrick Nip Tak-ken after he was said to have resisted Lam's order to enforce tighter discipline on the civil servants.

Ninety-one new trade unions in 15 months

The civil servants' union was among dozens of trade unions that sprang up in 2019 as Hongkongers looked for new ways to sustain the social movement behind months of anti-government protests from the middle of the year.

There were 25 new unions registered in 2019, almost double the 13 set up in 2018, according to Labour Department figures. By mid-March 2020, another 66 had been formed, with more in the pipeline.

They represented employees in a wide range of sectors, including the hotel, medical, optometry, dental, construction and information technology sectors, as well as bartenders and beauticians. Some were for workers previously not covered by any registered labour bodies.

The proliferation of new unions turned a page for Hong Kong's labour movement.

The Hong Kong trade union tradition

For a long time, the unions of mainly blue-collar sectors were dominated by the influential pro-Beijing Federation of Trade Unions (**HKFTU**), an umbrella body with 253 affiliates and more than 420,000 members.

It was almost three times larger than its opponent, the Confederation of Trade Unions (**HKCTU**),

which had 93 affiliates and 145,000 members.

The Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, founded by the late pro-democracy icon Szeto Wah in 1973, was the biggest trade union from a single sector, with more than 100,000 members.

Alex Tsui, new Hong Kong Hotel Employees Union

"We want to introduce a new culture of trade unions that are not just about labour rights, but also consolidate the voices of industry to resist the authorities," said Alex Tsui, 24, chairman of the new Hong Kong Hotel Employees Union.

A chef in a restaurant with two Michelin stars, he co-founded the union in November 2019 with dozens of others he had met via the encrypted messaging channel Telegram. He said clashes with police were necessary occasionally, but there was a need to bring Hongkongers together for the long-term battle to force the government to address their demands.

CUHK sociologist Chris Chan King-chi

Former labour organiser Chris Chan King-chi, who specialises in unionism, said Hong Kong's trade unions were traditionally set up after labour disputes and tended to involve mostly blue-collar workers.

He pointed out that the new wave had encouraged even those in the financial industry and information technology sector to unionise. He also noted that in the past, labour disputes required the intervention of external parties such as the Confederation of Trade Unions, and were handled by paid union organisers.

"Now these novices from different sectors have volunteered to do the job themselves, instead of relying on salaried organisers. This is what Hong Kong has lacked over the years," he said.

Carol Ng Man-ye, HKCTU

Carol Ng Man-ye, chairwoman of the Confederation of Trade Unions, said Hongkongers used to have reservations about trade unions and were reluctant to go against their employers, but the 2019 protests changed that.

"If we want to organise a real general strike, we have to form unions in various sectors," said Ng, who had been offering advice to the new unionists.

Also, having seen a rising number of frontline protesters arrested, people began to feel that strikes were a way to take the movement forward, she added.

Pandemic sparks a change of plans

The new unionists' main aim may have been to unify pro-democracy forces in their sectors and prepare for a powerful strike, but 2020 brought an unexpected enemy, the coronavirus crisis that affected workers across the economy.

Hospital Authority Employees Alliance

At the front line of this new battle were the city's health workers, who were worried about Hong Kong's proximity to mainland China where the pandemic was thought to have originated.

February 2020 witnessed the city's largest health workers' strike ever, organised by the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance formed only in December 2019.

Leaders of the alliance were at the forefront of the protests over the summer. As a result of their action, 9,000 hospital staff members left their posts for five days after the government refused to shut Hong Kong's border with the mainland completely.

The new union's membership soared in just two months to more than 18,000 - or 22.5 per cent of the 80,000 employees with the Hospital Authority, which manages all public hospitals and clinics and was the second-largest employer after the government.

The Hospital Authority blasted the industrial action, saying it had severely disrupted services at accident and emergency departments and put patients at grave risk.

Midway through the strike, Ian Cheung Tsz-fung, chief manager of cluster performance, said 3,100 nurses and 300 doctors were absent from work. Services had been affected at the neonatal intensive care unit, operating theatres and cancer departments, as well as at the obstetrics and gynaecology departments. There had been no blunders so far, but he added: *"If this carries on, I dare not guarantee that nothing will go wrong."* Some workers returned to help look after infants before the strike ended.

City leader Lam, who refused to meet the union leaders, said the "extreme" action of the striking workers would not force the government's hand. In the midst of the strike, however, she announced the closure of four more border crossings, but stopped short of demands to seal the entire border. There were fears of reprisals against those who went on strike.

Two medical associations - the Hong Kong Public Doctors' Association and the Frontline Doctors' Union - supported the new union and urged the Hospital Authority to respect workers' rights to strike even though their own members did not join the action.

"If any colleague is meted unreasonable treatment, we will respond in unity and provide relevant legal and other support," they said in a statement.

Hong Kong Hotel Employees Union

The pandemic brought chef turned unionist Tsui a growing pile of work as the hotel sector was hit hard, with workers being laid off or told to go on unpaid leave. The union demanded a more vigorous response from the hotel industry, including mandatory temperature screening for guests, turning away those with a fever, providing sufficient protective gear for staff and 14-day self-isolation leave with pay for employees who came into contact with infected people.

Membership of the union grew from 130 in December to about 500 by March, although that was a fraction of the estimated 40,000 people in the sector. "Most are adopting a 'wait and see' attitude," Tsui said. *"They do not want to speak up publicly against their employers, for fear of jeopardising their future."*

When a hotel abruptly laid off 200 staff, none of the 20 workers he approached had been willing to come forward to act against what he considered an unfair termination of their services. *"It is going to take a long time to educate them about why we should unionise,"* he said.

Civil service union

Civil service union leader Ngan also had to turn his attention to the Covid-19 pandemic. In February 2020, his union organised a rally to criticise the government's handling of the outbreak, accusing it of allocating protective gear unfairly among different departments.

Ngan, the union's spokesman, brushed aside fears of possible retaliation, saying: *"The government has repeatedly warned that civil servants should stay politically neutral and not hold opposing views, but civil servants should also fight for citizens' support and reflect their opinions to the chief executive."*

Tourism sector

The various developments left activist and campaigner Johnson Yeung Ching-yin feeling optimistic that the new unions would allow pro-democracy Hongkongers to reclaim the narrative. Using the tourism sector as an example, he said: *“There used to be only one voice, and it was pro-China, always calling for closer ties with the mainland. Now, these new unions can offer a very different voice.”*

Sociologist Chan more circumspect

Saying that it was a positive development for the labour movement that new unions were focusing on workplace issues, and not pursuing the political agenda only. He cautioned the new union leaders that successful unionism was a test of patience and could take years to bear fruit.

Sustaining their organisations would be a challenge too, especially if there were no issues to pursue in a particular sector. *“I would not be too optimistic,”* he said. *“Not everyone has such patience, especially when people in the street protests want immediate results.”*

P.S.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3088938/hong-kong-protests-why-trade-unions-have-mushroomed>