

Global Issues

The Politics of Unionisation in Hong Kong: An Interview with Dr Bill Taylor

*Interviewed by
Hong Yu Liu, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom*

Since the movement against the controversial legislation of the Extradition Bill in 2019, dozens of new unions have been formed in Hong Kong as a way to organise workers for collective labour actions. These actions include the medical workers' strike in February 2020, and the referendum arranged by thirty unions in June 2020. This new wave of unionism has without doubt become an influential political power in Hong Kong. In fact, unions in Hong Kong played an important role in the historical development of civil society and labour rights long before the handover of Hong Kong to the Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

However, in 2021, such labour activism is meeting a strong fightback from the Hong Kong government through its use of the National Security Law. Unions are disbanded or dismissed, their leaders are arrested and demonstrations are banned in the name of pandemic control. What are the possible impacts of the new union movement in Hong Kong's industrial relations today? Why does it matter for ordinary workers? In this interview, I discuss these questions with Dr Bill Taylor of the Department of Public Policy, City University of Hong Kong, in an attempt to provide some insights for academics about the rapidly changing political landscape in Hong Kong.

This dialogue is excerpted from a substantially longer version of an interview conducted for the Nordic Asia Podcast, co-hosted by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), University of Copenhagen, and its partner institutions. In preparing this shortened version, some minor changes were made, for the sake of readability and space constraints, but they do not affect the academic content of this interview. Ellipses (...) indicate gaps from the original full-length interview, which can be accessed at the Nordic Asia Podcast: <https://nias.ku.dk/nordic-asia-podcast/podcasts/the-state-of-the-hong-kong-labor-movements>.

KEYWORDS

labour activism; unionism; Hong Kong studies; social movement; industrial relations

* * *

HY = Hong Yu Liu

BT = Bill Taylor

HY: Long before the handover to the Chinese sovereignty in 1997, May 1, International Labour Day, had been a special occasion for union leaders in Hong Kong to campaign for better labour protection. This is the second year in a row that we have seen no public

activities taking place in Hong Kong on May Day. Where have the union leaders gone? And do you know what are they planning right now?

BT: I'm sure they are planning what they're going to read while they're waiting in detention centres for trial. Why people haven't been able to march – and not just on May Day, but for other commemorations such as June 4, the anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre – is because there's been a political crackdown. Basically, it's a way of saying, “a crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong”. And trade unions have, as they have in many places, taken the brunt of some of this backlash from the authorities. Two trade union leaders, the present head of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU) and a previous head of the CTU, are currently awaiting trial for their involvement in political demonstrations. ... They're basically demonstrations to highlight issues related both to civil society and particularly to workers' interests.

And so that's why it's especially quiet. It's also very difficult because for a protest to take place in Hong Kong, people have to apply to the police to give a letter of no objection, which means you cannot hold such a protest unless the police agree to it. Having said that, it has traditionally been quite easy to get letters of no objection, and basically that is how Hong Kong managed civil affairs for forty or fifty years until 2014, when there was a large civil movement. That settled down a year later, and then in 2019 it started again. The conflicts became quite violent, and the police were trying to suppress these political movements and political marches. And eventually they just didn't give these letters of no objection any more. And in other cases, they have given the letter and then withdrawn it. Thirty minutes later, they come in with tear gas. That's why people are not protesting. They can't.

HY: Has the May Day demonstration always been controversial? Could you also give us a bit of information about the historical developments of unionisation in Hong Kong and what makes the recent movement different from the past?

If we go quite far back, perhaps to the 1920s, the government's role has always been very important in this. There's a view that Hong Kong has a laissez-faire government, a non-interventionist government, but it's never been precisely that. And going back to the 1920s, there was a growth in trade unionism, a growth in worker interest, and there was a movement away from what had been the traditional labour organising way in much of China and also in Hong Kong, which was gangs. That is a labour gang system where a person employs other people in the contract relationship and then they sell that gang to the docks or whoever buys them, and quite a lot of the different elements have come, use the same labour gang system. And they're extremely exploitative because Hong Kong is basically a refugee society.

All the people in Hong Kong, particularly if we leave out the New Territories, are refugees almost entirely from different parts of China. They flowed into Hong Kong at different times, so these gangs always had a ready supply of extremely cheap and vulnerable labour. Going back to the 1920s and 1930s, the Hong Kong government was concerned that wages were being suppressed. And so they actually encouraged some early unionisation. And to some degree, this was to try to head off the fear of the Russian form of revolution.

But that evolved and they actively consulted these labour organisers, and they tried to encourage an improvement in labour standards. In the post-war period, they tried to do that again. But when we're talking about the late 1940s into the 1950s, what we had is the development of a very polarised system of industrial relations in Hong Kong. On the one hand, we had the pro-

Beijing grouping – what has become the Federation of Trade Unions (FTU); on the other, there was the Trade Union Congress (TUC), which had a Republican (Taiwan) alignment. So, you had this left-wing base, a radical base, and this Republican base, which mirrors what was happening in China long after the communists took power. ... So you had some replication of what was happening in China. Hong Kong was a microcosm of this conflict between the Guomindang (Kuomintang, also known as the Nationalist Party of China), which is pro-Taiwan leaders, and the communist leaders. And it was played out in Hong Kong.

And then from the 1960s onwards, you had a growth of independent, non-politically aligned groups often associated with Christian religion, with evangelical ideas coming in. This later formed something called the Christian Industrial Committee (CIC). And their concern was really initially dealing with the tens of thousands of young people who were ending up in factory work and homeworking.

As Hong Kong became the first of the little tigers, it became the first real powerhouse in Asia, outside Japan and South Korea and Taiwan and Malaysia. They didn't follow the Hong Kong example, but they started to develop soon after that. So, this Christian Industrial Committee became very concerned with what was happening to this growing working class who were often illiterate, and if they spoke Cantonese, they often spoke a different dialect.

When you walk along the promenade, you can hear four or five different languages spoken, particularly among older people. And these represent the different refugees who came at different times, not just during the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s when the population doubled. In fact, the population actually doubled at least twice. It doubled in the 1950s and then again in the 1970s. This politics of being two highly politicised camps and then this third growth of trade unions has marked out right to the present time how this idea of the politicisation of trade unions and the politicisation of the working class fits into wider geopolitical interests.

HY: Given the changing attitudes of government from supporting the union movement in Hong Kong in the past to nowadays becoming more hostile to union formations and union leaders, how do you perceive the impacts of the new unions in Hong Kong's industrial relations today?

BT: What you're referring to is that a fourth camp seems to have appeared. In 2019 there was this renewed social protest movement against a law that the local government was trying to pass. It would allow the extradition of suspects to Taiwan – so not criminals, but suspects; those terms often get deliberately confused politically. It came about following a murder case in which a man murdered his girlfriend in Taiwan and then fled back to Hong Kong, and there was no extradition treaty between Taiwan and Hong Kong. And so, the government wanted to pass such legislation. Sounds perfectly reasonable, but included in the treaty was extradition to mainland China. And that kicked off of a fuss because it meant that people could be taken to China for political crimes. It's a very good indication of how Hong Kong people feel.

As I said, Hong Kong is a place of refugees. It's also a place that has dissidents from China living and contributing to society here. People like Han Dongfang who set up the only independent trade union in 1989 and was imprisoned and ill-treated for his trouble. He lives in Hong Kong and runs an organisation here. But also other people, such as, Lee Cheuk-yan, who was in Beijing during the massacre in 1989 and he returned to Hong Kong. He can't go back as he is legally a dissident. The extradition changes would allow China to say, well, we want these people back in China to stand trial. Therefore, people didn't like that and there were mass protests, including well over a

million people in peaceful marches.

So it was a touchpaper for a whole lot of issues, including the problem that we have almost no laws to protect trade unions, no laws to protect collective bargaining. ... Although I said the government in the 1920s was quite keen on trade unions as a counter to extreme exploitation, these sorts of things are an indication that the British government is, and has been, extremely pro-business. On the other side, the trade unions have been seen by many as being caught up in politics. Even the Confederation of Trade Unions, which grew out of the Christian Industrial Committee, ... was focused on trying to change the laws, which is understandable.

So, the Confederation of Trade Unions got very much caught up in trying to change these laws. In 2019, unions had formed which were trying to be independent from all the existing political parties. But what many of them were initially interested in doing was trying to affect the process for electing the Chief Executive of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has functional constituencies and it has a partially functional electorate to choose the Chief Executive, who's a very powerful figure in the Hong Kong political system. It's the same as the Governor. Under the electoral system, trade unions had some electoral seats in order to have influence on that election, the same as doctors and some other groups. And so, some of the unions were set up in an attempt to increase the number of democratically oriented trade unions: we're talking about literally a couple of hundred of these pro-democracy unions being set up. The pro-Beijing camp also quickly set up thousands of trade unions and blocked that.

It became clear very early on that these new unions were not going to change the political landscape in Hong Kong. So many of them had already been formed with the idea that they would be democratic in a new way. They weren't going to focus on getting involved in city politics. Instead, they were going to work with their membership: their goal was participatory democracy, not electoral democracy. And so, they were very focused on listening to their members, and taking their agendas, their actions, their strategies not from the leadership, but through discussion with membership. And this was rather new in Hong Kong.

But this is debatable: Apo Leong, who is a long-time commentator and NGO activist within the community, thinks that these new unions are not really new, that many of the old unions drive union growth. There was a similar internal democratic element within them. But I think what's new is that they have tried not to direct their members' views, but to respond to them.

Now, there's something special about this. A democratic union – that is, a union that follows the membership's wishes – is a very dangerous organisation. This is because it's led from the bottom, and many trade unions that have responded in this way have been instrumental in political change in other countries. If we go to South Korea, an early example of that was Jeon Tae-il in 1970, who committed suicide by self-immolation in Seoul. It took another ten years for the democratic movement to develop, and another six years after that for the mass worker movement to lead to the collapse of the authoritarian regime in South Korea. The martyrdom of the early movement is still represented in the Korean trade union movement today, and capitalists are just as worried about that as they are about authoritarian dictators.

HY: How do you see the future of unionism in Hong Kong and where do you see it is heading?

BT: I think there's a lot of people in Hong Kong, from both political camps, who are really worried and interested in this issue. The new unions themselves are facing a difficulty because they did their work in an open atmosphere. They had their chat groups and their use of social media. But since the introduction of the National Security Law, many of those trade unions have either gone quiet

or they're using less open forms of communication.

They weren't prepared for the national security law and so they've taken a real hit. And the implications about that being non-patriotic – many of them are worried that their activities are illegal if they even question the government. When I say non-patriotic, I mean not being openly patriotic, so is not enough to just be quiet, you have to demonstrate your patriotism. Because they are open systems in which they listen to their membership, it's easy for them to be caught simply by a member saying that something that is critical of China or critical of the police or critical of the leadership in Beijing.

As a slight digression, this is a reason why most of the universities in Hong Kong are cutting their ties with their student unions, under the reason that if the student union does or says something that is seen as against national security, seditious or whatever, the university itself may be in trouble. And one thing about this National Security Law is it's a Chinese law as opposed to a Hong Kong law, so it's defined and understood in a very vague way. The Chinese view of law is that law is political; it's part of the Russian communist view, that nothing is above politics, and law is a political process. In this way, then, laws are also political. So, rule of law in the Chinese system really means laws according to political convenience or political practice, and that shouldn't be seen as a negative thing.

Looking at it from a traditional Leninist viewpoint, when it comes unstuck is when you try to equate that with an Anglo-Saxon liberal law, which is an idea that a law is an absolute rule of “do and don't”, a sort of negative legal system in which you can do anything unless the law says you can't. Now imagine where you have a situation that you don't know what you can't do. You have to guess what it is – not based on case law, but based on the latest instructions from the leadership. That's why people are so frightened in Hong Kong, and it affects unions in particular, although many people think it's the politicians that worry – the Democratic Party, the pro-Democratic camp obviously is in deep difficulties at the moment – but trade unions are also in difficulty because they ultimately are the core of a working-class movement. It is how the Russian Revolution got going.

While Mao depended on the peasants, it was the Shanghai and Guangdong trade unions that delivered the success of the revolution in urban areas. Russia collapsed because of Solidarnosc, a trade union in Poland, and so on. Trade unions are extremely dangerous, so control of trade unions is really important.

This leads us back to the Federation of Trade Unions (FTU) in Hong Kong. It is closely associated with the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) in China, which is one of the three mass organisations of the party. It's a party organisation along with the Youth League and the Women's League. And so we should see the FTU as an extension of the ACFTU, and it has followed the ACFTU. Whether there's a formal link or not is not clear, but it certainly practises as if there were. If we go back from the 1940s onwards, ACFTU's line on international relations is mirrored in the edicts and position of the FTU in Hong Kong.

So now there's officially really no opposition. If there is social democracy in Hong Kong, the FTU should be the leading force to organise workers. But it doesn't work that way because the ACFTU in China is traditionally criticised by everyone in China as being useless because it doesn't organise workers; it has great difficulty because no one has enthusiasm to join the organisation: Why would I join the ACFTU if I'm an activist? I want to join the party. Why would I talk to the subordinate when I can join the boss? So the ACFTU has been extremely weak.

So the FTU's problem is, how would it have strength? One way of having strength is the same way the CTU did – to join political parties. Well, if we're in a post-political-party situation, and there's only one party, then what is its role? ... So it's stuck and it's irrelevant. We're in the same situation as in China, that we have a gap in which the workers are told how to think, but they're

not represented. But that doesn't go well in capitalism because workers will always form their own organisations. ... And so the non-representation is a danger to the CCP, a danger to local capitalism, and a danger to the FTU.

HY: From what you have said, what does it matter for ordinary workers in Hong Kong?

BT: The ordinary workers in Hong Kong are a different profile of working class now than they were thirty years ago. It's a significant change. We've been used to an idea of refugees coming to Hong Kong. Capitalism depended on a ready supply of workers coming here, very often arriving off the boat or off the train with no money, or by illegally coming over the border and getting in touch with kinship networks, family members who've made it to Hong Kong before. That refugee population basically meant that people would self-sacrifice, that they would put up with almost anything.

That's why we have global migrations of refugees. People will die, literally, to ensure that their children have a better life. And Hong Kong has had this view that there's something called the lion rock spirit – you come to Hong Kong, you get into Kowloon, ... you arrive there, you've made it, and now it's up to you. No one will help you. The government won't help you. Friends and relatives will give you a start. It's sort of the American twentieth-century dream.

And we have lots of these cases of self-made people who are entrepreneurs and become billionaires. We have more Mercedes per square kilometre in Hong Kong than anywhere else in the world. We have more billionaires than anywhere else in the world. We also have fantastic inequality. And that's always been. Whereas Europe has seen inequalities lessen and then grow again, in Hong Kong it never went away. But, because of the growth, many people were persuaded that if they work hard, they could get on in whatever field.

Since China moved to capitalism from the 1980s, things have changed. Fewer people are coming to Hong Kong, and the mainland Guangdong province, where people speak the same Cantonese, has become a competitor. The economy has slowed down. Hong Kong has become a financial capital. There are very few people needed to make financial decisions. ... They just need a lot of money to play with. And Hong Kong is highly dependent on finance.

So what's happened to the working class is that wages have been frozen since the 1990s. This idea of self-reliance – it's very difficult to have examples now. Young people don't have a future unless they get an education, which they have to buy, and then they get into white-collar jobs or government-related jobs. The working class are stuck; for a decade or so many of them were able to go and work in China as supervisors, but even those sorts of jobs have gone. Or go and work in Vietnam ... as supervisors, and those jobs start to go.

So the ordinary people are more interested in having collective organisation now than they were in the past. That's why unionisation rates in Hong Kong were not high – between 20 and 30 per cent. But they never declined like in other localities. The working class, the left-behind group in Hong Kong, is very educated, articulate, and so they're a problem to the government. The government has tried to deal with it through social policy, trying to provide social welfare, but capitalists don't like that. There's been a capitalist-controlled government from the colonial era till now, and therefore it's been very difficult for them to provide meaningful social welfare to the local population.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Dr BILL TAYLOR is an Associate Professor at the Department of Public Policy, City University of Hong Kong. He has decades of experience in researching collective labour rights within countries in Asia, especially China. He teaches political economic philosophy, policy, Chinese politics, and employment relations in China and Hong Kong. His research focuses on collective labour rights within countries in Asia, especially China, and aspects of state and employer control, labour process and labour resistance. He has been a Senior Fulbright and Japan Foundation scholar as well as holding several academic and policy research grants. Previously, he worked on the China–EU Human Rights Dialogues and has briefed a number of government delegations to Hong Kong, and currently works with local labour NGOs. [ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9563-1646>]

HONG YU LIU is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Cambridge and a Marie Jahoda Visiting Fellow at the Digital Futures at Work Research Centre in the UK. He was also an awardee of the SUPRA Nordic Scholarship, presented by the University of Copenhagen, and was in virtual residency at the Nordic Institute of Asia Studies (NIAS) in 2021. [Email: hyl48@cam.ac.uk, corresponding author]