

“Hong Kong’s labor movement and the experience of the Hong
Kong Professional Teachers’ Union”

By Szeto Wah

Brothers and sisters, ladies and gentlemen:

It is a great honor to be the first speaker of the Albert Shanker Lecture series. This occasion has a special meaning for me because Al was my mentor. In the Chinese tradition, teaching is regarded as a profession that somehow stands above the concerns that are the normal and legitimate interests of other workers: wages, and working conditions. Unlike workers of other trades, teachers are not supposed to organize themselves into trade unions. It was the American Federation of Teachers, led by Al, that inspired me to break from this Chinese tradition and to lead Hong Kong teachers on strike in 1973, and following the success of the strikes, to form the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union (the PTU). Since the day it was established, the PTU has been the strongest trade union in Hong Kong.

From AI, I learned to combine professionalism and labor rights to organize a trade union and to employ trade unionism to promote democracy in society. The development of democracy is in turn the best guarantee for professionalism and labor rights.

Throughout my career, I have been guided by the understanding that democracy and freedom of association must be fiercely protected. Only in a democratic political system can human rights, freedom, and rule of law thrive.

Democracy that rests, not on the strength of representative institutions, but on the grace of rulers is always in danger of being diminished or removed.

Independent trade unions are the principal force in protecting and promoting democracy in society, because independent trade unions are organized forces. They are the organizations established through the free association of individuals to establish

collective rights. They represent their members, who also are members of society at large.

The key word here is "independent." "Independent" means not being controlled or influenced by any government.

Government-controlled unions are obstacles to democratic development. They also betray their members' trust and the rights of citizens in the larger society, because they represent the interests and policies of the government, not the individuals they claim to speak for.

It is no surprise, therefore, that in totalitarian countries, independent trade unions are outlawed. The organizations that are officially recognized as trade unions are used by the government or its rulers and strictly controlled. Therefore, as free and democratic trade unionists, we must give our fullest attention and support to the independent trade union movements that arise in any totalitarian country.

There are no independent trade unions in China, although workers today are organizing themselves at individual enterprises in order to protest their worsening situation. There are no independent trade unions for teachers or for any profession in China. In its first decades, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) relied on the labor movement's support, and fully understood its importance. After seizing power – and to this day -- the CCP exerted the strictest control on unions and punished any union leader who demonstrated any interest in independence.

Even in Hong Kong, organizing independent trade unions is rife with problems. First, although there is freedom to organize independent unions, the laws encourage the formation of a multiplicity of small unions at the same workplace – it only takes seven workers to set up a union. And, employees at a workplace can join as many unions as they wish or none at all. Such a confusing situation encourages divisions among workers and discourages solidarity. Second, laws designed to protect unions – passed decades ago – are not enforced. Employers routinely

attack and undermine unions and union leaders.. Third, there is no collective bargaining legislation. Employers need not recognize the rights of unions to bargain for employees, and unions do not have legal recourse if employers refused to negotiate. Fourth, throughout Hong Kong's history, most unions were controlled either by the Chinese Communist Party or the Kuomintang – the Chinese Nationalist Party, which for many years ruled Taiwan. These two parties have sufficient resources to support their affiliated unions. Independent unions have to fight for survival against these well-funded rivals. Fifth, for the longest time, unions have been the tools of these political parties, which did not protect their members' rights. Therefore, most employees do not trust unions and do not possess a strong union consciousness. Up to now, membership in unions is small, and unions can only charge nominal annual membership fees.

The Chinese Communist Party has roots in Hong Kong's labor movement, that long predate the 1997 handover from British to Chinese rule. In 1922, the second year after the Chinese

Communist Party was founded, it sent people to Hong Kong to lead the sailors' strike and to establish an underground Communist Party. The leader of the sailors' union, Su Zhaozheng, later became a member of the Central Committee of the CCP and representative of the Communist International. In 1925, there was a Guangzhou-Hong Kong general strike. One of its leaders, Deng Fa, later became an important Communist official and spy. Both these strikes paralyzed Hong Kong. After 1949 and the founding of the People's Republic of China, with the backing of a strong political power, pro-Communist unions developed very quickly in Hong Kong.

After the 1997 handover, Hong Kong, indirectly ruled by China, has seen many pro-Communist unions receiving even more support. These unions have grown in status and power. They are official members of government consultative bodies, which greatly increases the incentive of employers to negotiate with them. Their resources and influences have greatly improved their ability to reach out to the larger community with services and

support. Obviously, these developments pose a threat to the survival of other unions.

Hong Kong's independent union movement only began in the 1970s, but its roots reach back to the general chaos that existed in China during the Cultural Revolution. At that time, not much attention was directed to Hong Kong. In 1967, all the pro-Communist unions in Hong Kong took part in riots that were directly inspired by the Cultural Revolution. Pro-Communist union leaders were arrested, and their image was very badly damaged in Hong Kong. Second, Taiwan was replaced by the People's Republic of China in the United Nations in 1971, and Taiwan's attention was no longer given to external affairs, such as the Nationalist Party's affiliated unions in Hong Kong. This situation has become more pronounced since the Progressive Party assumed power in Taiwan. Third, even in the 1970s, the issue of the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule was a great concern. Hong Kong people were worried about their future. As a result, they became more identified with Hong

Kong as a city, and displayed more patriotism for their “city”, and exercised their own power to determine their own rights.

All of these events helped to create a space for the birth and growth of independent unions. The founding of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union grew out of a 1971 confrontation with the government, which I shall briefly describe:

At that time, the Hong Kong government planned to increase access to free public school education. It decided to fund this popular and welcome move by reducing teachers’ salaries.

Teachers did not like this strategy. After two years of fruitless negotiations, in 1973, I led teachers in planning three strikes. The first took place on April 4 (Children’s Day according to the Chinese calendar); the second on April 13 ("Black Friday"), and a third on May 4 (commemorating the May 4th movement of 1919).

After the first two strikes, we reached an agreement with the government. The PTU was founded based on the success of this struggle.

After 29 years of hard work, the PTU continues to grow stronger and larger. At its founding, we had 8,900 paying members; but now, we have 82,000 members, from kindergarten teachers to University professors and administrative and professional staff in the education field. The PTU itself has 153 salaried staff. The Union office opened in 1973 using borrowed spaces from other organizations, but now we own two offices both on Hong Kong island, and in Kowloon. Our member services include two co-op supermarkets, two medical clinics, two dental clinics, one medical laboratory, two optometrist centers, a bookstore, and selected services such as insurance, travel, educational resource center, continuing education programs. We publish biweekly newsletters with a print run of 90,000. In addition, we also publish special bulletins for University teachers, kindergarten teachers, parents, and youths. Our offices are open Monday to Saturday, from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., on Sundays, we open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. We have an average of 2,500 people visiting our offices daily. Our services are not only extended to our members,

but also other members of related unions, mainly from the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions. The above numbers show the level of how far we are reaching out to the community.

Since its founding in 1973, the PTU has been the largest and strongest union in Hong Kong. It was instrumental, in the early 1980's, in the creation of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, Hong Kong's equivalent of the AFL-CIO. I was the Hong Kong Confederation's first secretary-general.

Against this history and background, as trade unionists, what have we learned?

First, we insist on developing our work on three fronts.

- 1) We protect and extend our rights. We do not have collective bargaining power, but we do have a strong base, so the

government must listen to us. For example, because of demographic changes, the student population is shrinking but no teachers have lost their jobs.

2) We offer benefits and services. We offer services to strengthen the union and benefit our members. This is the basis for our expanding and extending our resources. If we only rely on membership fees, we do not have enough capital to sustain our work. But our two cooperative supermarkets generate total annual revenues of HK\$200 million (US\$25 million). Including revenues from our other services, we generate some surplus in our annual budget. Our two offices were bought with these budgetary surpluses. We rely on market research to identify those services and goods for our members. We always place service to members first.

3) We improve our professional ideals, reform education, support justice, participate in social movements. The PTU encourages and promotes higher professional standards among our members.

We encourage the government to reform our educational system. In this context, the union plays a leading role in the political process, in support of democracy in Hong Kong and China. Since 1985, when the Legislative Council established elections for functional constituencies – a system in which society’s “functions” – in medicine, education, labor etc. – are represented in the Legislative Council -- PTU representatives have won every single election in which they have run by a wide margin. I should note here that the union functional constituencies are taken by unions that are not in the independent labor movement. This is a reflection of their strong numbers and outside financial support.

And so, PTU representatives have run for the education constituency. I held that seat until 1990, when I ran in the newly established direct elections. In that same election, the PTU president Cheung Man-kwong ran for the functional constituency seat for education. We were both elected and have remained in the Legislative Council ever since. Our victory, against the odds,

reflected the strong united voice of teachers, and strengthened those voices that support democracy and justice.

The teachers' union is also the organizational heart and strength of Hong Kong's democracy movement. It is a pillar of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China, an umbrella organization of 210 Hong Kong groups formed in May, 1989, to support the democracy movement in China. The Alliance remains a strong coalition today.

And finally, the teachers' union is also the organizational base of the Hong Kong Democratic Party, which is the strongest pro-democracy political party in the city.

It should be no surprise that the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union is the flagship of Hong Kong's democratic movement and, in concert with the independent trade union movement as a whole, provides the energy and organizational strength that sustains it. Historically, mass-based independent

trade unions have played the critical role in promoting and sustaining democracy around the world. It is no different in Hong Kong.

We believe that the participation of independent trade unions in the political life of Hong Kong is more important than it ever was.

We are engaged in a struggle to protect freedom and the rule of law. This is a battle that is being carefully watched, by human rights groups and trade unions. Representatives of the business community are also concerned. They wonder whether or not Hong Kong will remain a good place to invest. I remain optimistic.

I will now share some unique PTU experiences with you.

We are for democracy and we practice democracy in the PTU by:

1) recognizing that every staff and all PTU members are equal, and that no one has special rights or privileges; 2) ensuring that all decisions are made after thorough discussions. If votes for and

against a motion are too close, decisions are deferred to a later meeting, rather than forcing an upfront decision; 3) respecting everyone's opinions, especially our members' opinions; 4) conducting frequent opinion polls from members, collecting different opinions from all sides; 5) having one-man-one-vote in our internal elections.

All of our Executive Committee and Senate members remain in their full time educational jobs. Accordingly, they remain in close touch with their colleagues in the field, and are open and ready to receive suggestions anytime. If they become salaried staff of the PTU, they must resign from the Council or the Senate. All Committee members and Senators are volunteers. They also treat PTU staff as working partners.

As I noted earlier, PTU leaders participate in Hong Kong's political system. Our goal is to voice the union's opinions in the political system. However, we never forget that our power exists outside the structure. We especially guard against corruption and

any distortion of democratic representation that would destroy our integrity. We never forget that PTU is our most important base and that we must promote honest democracy within the PTU. Only with democracy can we unite people. Only by exercising democracy can we motivate and lead our members. We cannot work to promote social democracy and not practice democracy within the PTU.

In Hong Kong, any organization, especially those large independent labor unions such as the PTU, must be very careful that political groups do not infiltrate and seize power. The PTU has experienced these attempted coups, but we successfully fought them. The main weapons that we used to defend ourselves were the direct election system and the balance of power between our Executive Committee and the Senate.

We believe that that our experience has been very valuable and we intend to carry on down this road.

I would like to end on a personal note:

My life career is teaching. At the same time, I also participate in democratic movements. My only wish is to educate good students and see democratic China. In 1989, the student movement was striving for a democratic China, so I supported the movement.

At that time, I was a member of the Basic Law drafting committee, which was creating the legal framework for a post-1997 Hong Kong. I had been appointed by the Beijing government. During the meetings, I worked hard at creating a democratic Basic Law.

But the Chinese Communist Party's tactic -- the Tiananmen massacre -- made me see clearly the real quality of the Communists. I spoke out and was suspended from the Basic Law drafting committee by the Chinese government.

I feel that democracy is the goal that China has been fighting for, for more than one hundred years. The 1989 student movement was a very good opportunity to make progress. If the Chinese government had accepted the students' demands, China would have gone on the democratic path.

This incident set back democracy in China by twenty years.

Still, I am optimistic. I might not see a democratic China in my lifetime, but I believe a democratic China must come.

For myself, I would like to be able to say, as did the American thinker and writer of "Commonsense", Thomas Paine, at the end of his life:

"My whole life has been spent on doing something useful for society."

I wish I could say this at the end of my own life.

Thank you very much.