

Bank of China accused of political pressure

10,000 bank staff told to oppose polls

EXCLUSIVE by ANN QUON and STANLEY LEUNG

THOUSANDS of employees of the Bank of China and its 12 sister banks are being pressured into signing a petition to oppose direct elections next year.

The campaign, aimed at all 10,000 employees, is being co-ordinated by the bank's personnel department and staff believe they are obliged to give it their support.

"Although nobody is saying it in so many words, the pressure is there to sign or our promotion prospects might be threatened," said a banking officer who asked not to be named.

The official said all banking staff were being instructed to sign a position paper opposed to direct elections which would be forwarded to the Hongkong Government's Independent Survey Office before the end of the public consultation period on September 30.

Staff were also urged to

send in individual submissions which were in line with those given at a recent talk by a Basic Law Consultative Committee official who spoke against direct elections or any political change.

The mainland banking network, second only to the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, has about 280 branches.

It is believed to be part of a wider campaign involving mainland organisations and other left-wing groups aimed at countering the lobby which wants direct elections introduced next year.

Last week the director of the New China News Agency, Mr Xu Jiatur, called for calm to ease tension in the political debate.

Other groups believed to be included in the left-wing campaign against direct elections include China Resources Company which has about 50 subsidiaries, 50 joint ventures, 27 shopping arcades, 13 emporiums and six supermarkets.

A Bank of China source said that many employees had become disillusioned with the bank's pressure tactics and were considering their positions.

This included local university graduates who were hired on the understanding that the bank was strictly a commercial concern.

"They are mixing business with politics and many of us feel that this kind of political pressure is inappropriate for the image of the bank," said a middle-ranking official.

The official said that many employees felt they were being used to force an issue in which they had no particular concern.

The Bank of China campaign began in July when the deputy Secretary General of the Basic Law Consultative Committee, Mr Ma Lik, addressed 80 top executives from the banking group on the Government's Green Paper.

Mr Ma's talk was arranged by the personnel department, which is co-ordinating the bank's political campaign.

Mr Ma's two-hour talk

was delivered after office hours and taped on video.

At the end of his speech, Mr Ma urged banking staff to sign the position paper which opposes direct elections to the Legislative Council next year.

Mr Ma said that if all the Bank of China's staff of 10,000 expressed opposition to direct election, it would be effective in influencing the Green Paper outcome, the official said.

A bank official who attended the talk said: "It was very clear from his concluding remarks that Mr Ma wanted us to object to direct elections in 1988 and oppose any change to the political structure."

However, Mr Ma denied that he presented only one side of the story.

"I gave balanced views on the Green Paper including the pros and cons of direct elections," he told the *South China Morning Post*.

He also said he was aware his talk had been recorded. Mr Ma is said to have used the phrase "gong ying yum mao", (which means a conspiracy between the British and Hongkong governments) repeatedly during his talk and it comes up several times in the video.

An edited version of his address was shown a week later to a group of 500 middle-ranking bank executives that included managers and assistant managers, during office hours.

This was followed by an appeal to section heads to arrange political discussions with their staff.

"We were told to organise our staff and get them to express their opinions to the Survey Office and that these should be in line with the views of Mr Ma," said one section head.

According to a Bank of China employee, sister banks have been requested to draw up similar anti-election position papers and circulate them for signing by all staff.

"I know a few colleagues who have objected to the heavy-handed tactics used by the bank and have refused to sign," said an official.

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It is not known how many employees have signed, but it is understood the number is far less than the bank had expected.

A Bank of China official from the personnel department declined to comment on its position regarding the Green Paper.

"This (collection of views on the Green Paper) is an internal matter and I am not prepared to make any public statement," said a bank spokesman.

It is believed that the submissions will be co-ordinated by the local branch of the New China News Agency, China's de facto mission in Hongkong.

With only three weeks left for the public to finalise views on the Green Paper, other left-wing organisations, including the mighty 170,000-strong Federation of Trade Unions, are expected to step up its battle against the introduction of direct elections next year.

The federation, which has strong grassroots support, has also asked its members to sign a form letter opposing direct elections in 1988.

The FTU has asked its members to support a position paper that includes three recommendations - convergence between political reforms and the Basic Law, the unsuitability of introducing direct elections in 1988 and retaining the Governor's presidency over the Legislative Council.

The option of introducing direct elections is absent from the document.

FTU vice-chairman Mr Tam Yiu-chung also a legislator and Basic Law drafter, hinted that if members really supported direct elections, they could state their views in an item headed "other suggestions".

Union members were also encouraged by their union leaders to obtain signatures from their friends and relatives in support of the submission. It is believed that each member has been told to get support from three other people.

Mr Tam said the union would submit its position paper and all the signatures collected along with identity card numbers to the Survey Office for consideration.

In its determination to fight direct elections, the left-wing campaign is believed to be supported by a strong Communist Party network in Hongkong.

According to published information on the CCP or-

ganisation in Hongkong, NCNA director Mr Xu is chairman of a CCP working party known as the Hongkong and Macau Work Committee.

The committee is represented by the heads of all major left-wing bodies in Hongkong and Macau including the Bank of China, China Resources, China Merchants Steam Navigation Company and Macau's Nam Kwong Company.

There is good reason to believe that other mainland or pro-China organisations have been mobilised in the anti-direct election campaign.

Left-wing organisations here include the China Travel Services, China National Aviation Corporation, two left-wing newspapers, the Federation of Education Workers, various clansmen's associations, mutual aid committees and the Chinese General Chamber of Commerce.

It is difficult to provide an exact figure of the number of employees who are attached to left-wing groups in the territory.

A rough estimate suggests there are over 200,000 such employees excluding their families. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that a maximum of 500,000 could be mobilised for the left-wing campaign.

Two senior NCNA officials, Mr Mao Junnian and Mr Qiao Zonghuai, are also known to be lobbying pressure group leaders to drop their support for direct elections next year. Through debates, at least, the NCNA officials are able to publicise China's intentions towards Hongkong and soften the leaders' stance.

Mr Ma also spoke on the Green Paper at a forum organised last week by the left-wing Federation of Education Workers whose members mainly come from the teaching staff in pro-Beijing schools. Two other speakers were Basic Law Consultative Committee members Ms Veronica Wu and Mr Tso Wung-wai.

Some have questioned whether Mr Ma's active role in the political debate conflicts with his BLCC duties.

As a BLCC secretariat official, his role is to collect views and consult with the public.

However, those who have heard him speak say he is taking a far-from-passive role in the political discussion.