

Action takes leftwing circles by surprise

BY STAFF REPORTERS

The taxi drivers' action on Wednesday and Thursday apparently took leftwing circles as much by surprise as it did the general public.

Although towards Thursday evening, the drivers' action showed an exceptional degree of co-ordination and, in the end, the Motor Transport Workers' Union stepped in and petitioned the Hongkong branch of the New China News Agency, their action showed signs of being spontaneous rather than premeditated.

It is generally believed that the MTWU does have a very well-organised plan for industrial action and it could be put into action at a moment's notice.

However, the taxi drivers themselves have unconsciously worked out a plan of their own accord — though with some experience drawn from the MTWU "training" — as a regular taxi passenger

would easily discover.

The taxi drivers have a powerful weapon — their radio communication system, using the taxi companies as the central point.

This was shown in the early stage of the industrial action when calls were made to all taxis throughout the territory to converge on Central. Food and drinks were served at a moment's notice.

Drivers interviewed by the army of reporters during the past three days also indicated that the powerful leftwing union came into the picture only late on Wednesday.

Most drivers expressed indignation as private individuals, most concerned with their families' livelihood.

Only when the MTWU stepped in was there an indication that the whole episode could turn into a political issue between Hongkong and China.

And when the MTWU decided to "petition" the director of the Hongkong Branch of the New China News Agency, Mr Xu Jiatur, there was apprehension that China might be asked to step in.

At the same time, there were whispers that the action was well-planned by China to counter a rumoured claim that China would not react to the drastic Government action of hefty increases in registration tax and licence fees.

Some political analysts disagreed with this contention. The fact that it took the MTWU nearly a whole day to step into the picture and take the decision to appeal to Mr Xu showed that the drivers wanted to take their case to the Chinese side, rather than that they had been organised to take industrial action.

This line of reasoning was further supported by the MTWU representatives being received by a vice-director and a

deputy chief editor of the NCA, rather than Mr Xu himself. Had Mr Xu met them, this could be interpreted as Chinese support for the drivers whatever statement he might make to them.

As it was, not only was Mr Xu not available, but the vice-director, while sympathising with the drivers' grievances, called on the Hongkong Government to seek a speedy solution to the problem in the light of Hongkong's prosperity and stability — a clear indication that China would not intervene unless absolutely necessary.

This, analysts went on, was similar to the situation during the dollar crisis last September. China felt it was the duty of the Hongkong Government to resolve Hongkong's own problem and only when the Hongkong Government proved to be totally incapable of resolving the situation would China step in.

In a broader sense, the taxi drivers' action was also a test for China's policy of "Hongkong people governing Hongkong" in a post-1997 era. If China were to intervene actively, this could be held up as an example of what would happen after 1997 when Hongkong becomes, in China's concept, a special administrative region.

At the same time, analysts said, the taxi drivers' action showed how fragile the base for stability in Hongkong could be. Any issue that might increase a section of the population could flare up into a major confrontation or upheaval, with possible violent consequences.

This was probably crystal clear to leading members of leftwing circles and the emphasis on the need to maintain prosperity and stability by the NCA vice-director reflected this understanding.

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