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Attempt on merger of unions fails

By Tonny Chan

FREE trade unionists have failed in their attempt to gain influence in the civil service.

The 20,000-strong Federation of Civil Servants has rejected overtures from the free Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU) to join them.

On Tuesday, the federation's executive committee voted narrowly against a motion for affiliation.

The defeat came despite active lobbying by the chairman, Michael Siu, and vice-chairman of the federation, Leung Chaoting, both CTU organisers, for the move.

The Federation of Civil Service Unions has 30 affiliate unions whose members are mainly from the rank-and-file sector of the civil service.

If the federation had chosen to affiliate, it would have enabled the coalition to extend its influence to the civil service.

Sources said all 15 executive committee members attended the Tuesday meeting.

In a secret ballot, eight voted against the affiliation and seven for.

The sources said the ballot was preceded by a vote that required a two-thirds majority for affiliation to be approved.

Supporters of the motion are expected to ask the annual general assembly of the federation in September to review the decision, according to Mr Siu.

For the time being, Mr Siu said, it would be up to the individual member unions to decide whether to join the CTU or not.

The sources said an executive member had tried to persuade the supporters and opponents to compromise on the matter without calling for a vote.

"Now I am worried the vote will polarise contradictions within the group after more than an hour of heated debate on the matter," one source said.

According to sources, opponents said the CTU was political and it was unwise for the federation to join it when local politics remained unclear.

But the supporters pointed out workers would be in a more powerful position to fight for labour rights if the various trade unions could unite.

They said the federation had a long tradition of active participation in social and labour affairs and this tradition was consistent with the aims of CTU.

The sources said there had been concern that some unions may terminate their affiliation with the federation in protest if the motion was passed.

The sources said if a majority of the member unions of the federation felt the time was ripe for affiliation, they could discuss the question again.

The defeat of the motion may also imply an uphill battle for the current leadership in seeking re-election at the general assembly in September.

Former chairman of the federation, Wong Wai-hung, said he did not believe Mr Siu could win easily if he decided to stand for another term.

Mr Wong was toppled last September in a vote of no-confidence moved by seven executive members led by Mr Siu, who was then the vice-chairman.

The CTU has about 20 trade unions with a combined membership of some 100,000.