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Activist tipped to head union

By JOYCE NIP

TRADE unionist Lau Chin-shek, one of five liberal activists convicted on Friday for illegally using a loudhailer and collecting funds, is expected to be elected leader of a new independent trade union which will be officially formed today.

The election of Lau as chairman of the Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU) is seen as a vote of confidence from union members, many of whom believe that the court case was politically motivated by the Government out of deference to Beijing.

However, the case has aroused some concern among members that Lau may use his position to turn the trade union body into a political platform for his own liberal cause.

Lau, who is on the executive committee of the United Democrats of Hongkong (UDHK), the territory's first liberal political party, dismissed such fears as unfounded.

"I think it is the other way round. CTU would certainly lobby the UDHK its labour platform," he said.

He also sought to distance the CTU from the two other major labour bodies, the pro-Beijing Federation of Trade Unions (FTU) and the pro-Taipei Hongkong and Kowloon Trades Union Council (TUC).

"We are different from the existing two labour forces in that we do not answer to any political party," he said.

Fears that the CTU would become involved in politics have threatened to undermine its role as a challenger to the two trade unions.

Mr Michael Siu Yin-ying, chairman of the 20,000-strong Federation of Civil Service Unions (FCU), said one member union had threatened to withdraw from the FCU if it joined the CTU.

The FCU executive committee therefore had decided not to join the FCU in order not to antagonise its members, said Mr Siu.

Only six of the 18 individual unions under the Federation of Hongkong and Kowloon Labour Unions (FLU),

led by Mr Lee Kai-ming, have joined the CTU despite the FLU itself being a founder organisation.

He admitted some unions probably would refrain from joining because of the strong views of some individuals such as Mr Szeto Wah, Mr Cheung Man-kwong and himself, over last year's Beijing massacre.

Mr Szeto, Mr Cheung, and Lau, who are leaders of some CTU member unions, are also leaders of the Hongkong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China.

These leave the CTU with 97,000 members, 37 per cent of all independent union members, from 21 trade unions and four union federations.

Lau, chairman of the CTU Organising Committee, however said the existing strength of the CTU was "not far" from initial expectations.

He said most of the active independent unions had joined, except the FCU. "It is a good starting point," he said.

However, although the FLU decided to be a founder organisation of the CTU when it was organised about two years ago, Mr Lee Kai-ming said he feared support among member unions was eroding.

Lau also agreed some civil servant unions were concerned only about civil servant welfare and would not like to co-operate with other unions on a permanent basis.

The major purpose of the CTU was to develop a labour platform among a solidarity of independent trade unions, said Lau.

Recognition of the bargaining role of trade unions was the prime aim CTU would work for, he said.

The union leader believed the CTU would be able to support member unions with material and information resources for their development.

In terms of membership, Lau foresaw the CTU would "certainly" compete with the FTU, the largest single trade union force of 174,000 members.