

Actions speaking louder than words

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PROFILE: Lee Cheuk-yan

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LEE Cheuk-yan thinks the Legislative Council is a bore. He dreads the idea of sitting weekly in meetings that seem to know no end.

There may be serious business to be done but the union leader finds it all too meaningless – especially when it comes to the passage of legislation that proves threatening to the rice bowls of local workers.

And, he believes, even when Legco members occasionally ignite fireworks, whatever words they exchange are not loud enough to wake people up.

"I dislike meetings and especially Legco meetings. I simply am not impressed by the set-up," he said.

To the chief executive of the 105,000-strong Hongkong Confederation of Trade Unions, time is better spent outside the chamber leading those ever-more-frequent demonstrations. He enjoys life better when it comes to putting pressure on the councillors, forcing them to accept presentations and letters, or simply saying and doing things to embarrass the Government.

So while his colleagues in the confederation – namely unionist Mr Lau Chin-shek and democrat Mr Szeto Wah – show much keenness in handing out self-promoting pamphlets outside MTR stations and factories and more or less begging passers-by to vote, he chooses to cut a tough image at protests with his headband caked in sweat and arms raised.

The University of Hongkong civil engineering graduate – who earned street credibility after his detention in China two years ago at the peak of the June 4 military crackdown – could easily win a Legco seat.

He shot to fame after he returned to Hongkong from the battleground in Beijing. More than 500 well-wishers greeted him at Kai Tak.

If there is any truth in what some have been saying – that if you are well-known you will almost certainly win in an election in Hongkong – Mr Lee could become a Legco member.

But the 34-year-old unionist chooses not to be part of the small

tidal wave of directly-elected members despite the fact that their presence is almost certain to make a change – a small one admittedly – at the traditionally orderly and predictable meetings.

To the labour unionist, too many people are showing an interest in becoming Legco members. He does not see the need to join the craze.

"Everybody has his role to play. Mine is in the streets – among the workers – helping them set up trade unions, and resolving any problems that may come their way in their dealings with their employers," he said.

In his decade-long career as a union official, Mr Lee has been involved in many battles, from the recent assembly of knitwear workers to last year's dispute with Kowloon Motor Bus (KMB) management.

The KMB controversy was sparked by the dismissal of bus driver Mr Leung Ting-kin who, in his capacity as deputy complaints officer of the KMB Staff Association – a union which Mr Lee helped to set up – grumbled on television about the deafening engine noise on some buses.

It was the kind of remark passengers have made. So when the KMB management dismissed Mr Leung, the Hongkong Confederation of Trade Unions along with the KMB Staff Association decided it was an unfair dismissal and should not go unchallenged.

"We won. KMB had to give in and reinstated the union guy," recalled Mr Lee, adding: "Even that did not come about easily."

It takes years for a newly-established union like the KMB Staff Association to muster enough support from workers, and even longer for an employer to see the need for regular dialogue with union members.

"The KMB management, for instance, has still to come to the negotiating table with the union – two years after it was established.

"Some employers just think it is a sign of weakness talking to the

union. They think it means giving in. It is not true.

"It is better for them to recognise employees' rights than forcing them to take their case to the public, and complain through the media," he said.

But there are more discouraging events than failing to get a Hongkong boss to talk to his employees about their welfare – the latest being the passage by a three-to-one margin of the Trade Description (Amendment) Bill.

The bill, which allows "Made in Hongkong" labels to be applied to garments manufactured in part on the mainland, is seen as a threat to the territory's 38,000 knitwear workers – with job losses that range from the industry's estimates of 2,000 to workers' own 9,000.

Fears that the bill would threaten the jobs of local workers fell on deaf ears.

But to put matters in perspective, this is only the latest in the long line of battles lost in the hands of Mr Lee. Last year, he was

among the many union leaders attacking a Government decision to import foreign workers.

Hongkong was already facing an uncertain political future while many entrepreneurs were moving their capital overseas, he said. Making the life of workers more miserable was the last thing a responsible Government should do.

Then, Mr Lee was vocal in his belief that the shortage of labour was not as tight as employers claimed, because many employees in various sectors were already working shorter hours.

Employment opportunities for local people would be reduced by bringing in semi-skilled foreign workers, Mr Lee said.

But he did not have it his way. A year on and amid the excitement sparked by the airport agreement, the Government is discussing the idea of importing more foreign workers.

Mr Lee, meanwhile, has lost none of the enthusiasm.

"I consider the controversy generated by the Trade (Description) Bill a good experience. I

don't see it as a loss on our part. In fact, it shows our effort has paid off," he said.

Mr Lee was referring to a protest involving more than 1,000 workers.

"We did not do much to publicise the march. All we did was to tell them we were going to protest and they showed up on their own.

"It is a success because it involved little publicity work. It was a kind of awakening on the part of workers.

The experience serves to confirm his belief that becoming a Legco representative is not his cup of tea.

"There is no point in me lobbying for them while they do nothing. Rather people should participate, and not just sit there expecting others to do all the work for them," he said.

"Besides, we are only talking about 18 directly-elected seats – a minority when it comes to labour matters. And there is not enough people fighting for labour rights in the streets. That is why I prefer to stay out of Legco."