

A union fights shy of taking stand on Cathay

POLITICS



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THE role played by the Federation of Trade Unions in the Cathay Pacific strike does not seem to match its reputation as the biggest labour group in town.

Mr Tam Yiu-chung, who represents the 190,000-strong FTU in the legislature, pledged verbal support to the Cathay Flight Attendants' Union when the dispute escalated early this week.

The federation's nominee to the official Labour Advisory Board also joined other employee representatives in condemning the insensibility of the airline's management.

But the pro-China FTU's words of solidarity have hardly been translated into concrete actions. It has even refrained from joining a coalition of 35 concern groups formed in support of the strikers.

Instead, the united front is headed by Mr Lee Cheuk-yan, executive director of the Confederation of Trade Unions who is also at the helm of the local movement to press for greater human rights in China.

The confederation, which has a much shorter history than the FTU, has contributed in mobilising international support for the cabin crew members on strike.

The United Democrats, on the other hand, have also sent

their legislators to cheer up the pickets and offer free legal advice to their negotiating team.

Leaders of the liberal party asked Mr Lee's group how they could help as early as in the formative days of the strike two weeks ago.

The confederation's initial assessment was that the Cathay Pacific Flight Attendants' Union was well organised and there was little practical need for friendly input from outside.

The only defective aspect about the organisers of the picket appears to be their ineptitude in liaising with the press. However, the timing of the strike has offset much of their inexperience. The news media have been hungry for stories during the Lunar New Year holidays.

It was the Cathay management's insistence on taking unspecified disciplinary actions against what it regards as a

handful of rabble-rousers that has opened the way for pressure group interference.

A more flexible employer would have offered not to discipline any staff members in the strike, while reserving its legal rights to exercise such powers in future cases. But the Cathay managers have insisted that it is a matter of principle that their authority, including that to discipline unco-operative workers, should not be diminished by any strike actions.

That obdurate position has backfired and become an open invitation for politicians to intervene. Social activists now assert that it is also a matter of principle for them to act as workers' rights to collective bargaining are being jeopardised.

The original pay and conditions conflict was soon glorified into a crusade in defence of the

rights and dignity of the workers.

Even smaller independent labour groups such as the one led by the District Board member, Mr Leung Yiu-chung, have found it possible to assume a conspicuous role in backing the strikers.

Mr Leung and his colleagues from Kwai Tsing are often seen before television cameras with their banners carrying solidarity messages in front of the picket lines.

Maverick legislator Mr Chim Pui-chung, returned by the insurers and brokers, also scored some political points out of the confrontation. He has neither sided with the union nor is he concerned about the adequacy of the labour laws.

Mr Chim has taken advantage of the situation to write to the acting Governor, Mr Hamish Macleod, complaining about the Government's protective aviation policy in favour of Cathay.

The Cathay management claimed yesterday that 90 per cent of its flight attendants have reported to assume duty next month. Yet, public sympathy for the flight attendants has been on the rise over the question of whether there is adequate legal protection for workers on strike.

The matter has been distilled

into a four-character Chinese metaphor *Qiuhou Suanzhang*, suggesting that the authority will retaliate after the autumn harvest.

The phrase has been written on the pickets' banners and repeated to the press by the union leaders and their supporters. Virtually all Chinese-language news media have adopted the expression in their coverage of the event.

The idiom was widely used to denounce the Beijing regime's iron-fist policy against the dissidents after the Tiananmen Square military crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in 1989. It has become emotive, local phraseology reserved for depicting authoritarian, reprisal measures.

It is unclear whether the choice of the powerful metaphor has been suggested by the flight attendants or their activist supporters. But it is certain that the idea did not come from the left-wing Federation of Trade Unions.

Recent major labour movements have turned out to be an embarrassment of some sort for the FTU. The federation, for instance, has been opposing the Government's decision to import skilled labourers from overseas to ease shortages in some trades.

Frustrated by the admini-



Lee Cheuk-yan: united front.

stration's firm stance, some unionists have suggested a fund be set up to prepare for possible strikes.

The FTU, however, has been accused by the more radical independent and liberal unions of dragging its feet on the workers' efforts. The Chinese authorities, as some unionists have noted, do not want to promote labour unrest which might undermine the territory's economic well-being.

Some went as far as suggesting that the FTU's hands are tied in the Cathay case, because of the China-funded establishment, CITIC's substantial share-holding in the company.

Though that accusation can

hardly be substantiated, the federation did leave an impression that it wants to keep a distance from the liberal activists.

The FTU, however, has indeed been less confrontational in its approach to labour issues. It has, for instance, resolved to accept the official scheme on retirement funds without government financial guarantees as the best option.

Meanwhile, the Confederation of Trade Unions and its democratic allies are still considering whether they should reject the half-hearted offer and insist on a government-guaranteed scheme.

Veteran unionist Mr Lau Chin-shek, who carries the United Democrats' flag in the Kowloon East constituency, proposed weeks before the Cathay strike that Legco should hold an adjournment debate on the right to collective bargaining.

Due to the tight schedule of the assembly, the debate is unlikely to be realised in the current legislative year.

But the present situation has given a sense of renewed urgency for the topic to be put on the legislators' agenda. If the debate is accommodated, the speech by Mr Tam Yiu-chung would certainly be scrutinised by the workers he is supposed to represent.

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