

A warning on dangers from powerful trade unions

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It could be a danger for Hongkong to have powerful trade union blocs which could influence and upset Government policies, the Registrar of Trade Unions, Mr J. R. Allen, said yesterday.

There was, however, no legislation which endeavoured to prevent such blocs being set up in the Colony.

The evidence was that local trade unions preferred to have small-scale blocs, and ignored his advice to join together, said Mr Allen.

"This is not a question of the Government or anyone else trying to keep the trade union movement splintered and less effective," he added.

Speaking on HK-TV's "Meet the Press" programme, Mr Allen said earlier that he would like to see fewer but more viable, effective and consolidated trade unions in Hongkong.

However, he saw "quite a large number" of potential dangers, if local trade unions became as powerful as their counterparts in the United Kingdom.

"Hongkong is in a very different situation from UK. What is normal in the UK and what has been a normal trade union development in the UK and elsewhere is not necessarily normal in Hongkong," he explained.

Giving an example of a potential danger, Mr Allen said: "There had been comments in the press by visitors that Hongkong needs some forms of minimum wage structure . . . As you may be aware there are many hundreds of thousands of small factories, shops, or undertakings which are over-employed in the sense they are employing far more people than their businesses can carry.

"In many cases it is members of the families or distant cousins; they feel obliged because of family ties to give them some form of work. They take them on and naturally they cannot afford to pay more than a certain level of wages.

"Were legislation to be brought in to enforce a minimum wage, and to make it mandatory, the immediate effect is that overnight there will be hundreds of people out of jobs on the streets and a great deal of discontent."

Speaking of trade union development in Hongkong since the Korean War, Mr Allen said it was "a step" behind local industrial development.

However, it had shown definite signs of catching up during the past few years.

As local workers became more skilful and the demands for them by industries greater, a situation would come when employers had to give them far more recognition.

He agreed that local left-wing trade unions were better organised.

Mr Allen went on to say that it was not generally known that local trade unions had been offering valuable services to members and their families.

Outlining the work of his Department, Mr Allen said they included advising workers on the procedures of forming a trade union, looking after union members' interests, and most important of all, ensuring that no confidence tricksters could form a union for their own ends.