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Hongkong's workers must surely be delighted with Friday's announcement from London confirming that Jack Carter, presently Commissioner of the Independent Commission Against Corruption, is to take over as Chief Secretary from Sir Denys Roberts.

Mr Carter it was who many years ago introduced the legislation which gives the workers one day off in a week. He is also a well-known Labour supporter who has broad sympathies with the plight of working people, whether it be in Hongkong or the United Kingdom.

With his guiding hand at the helm, there is a good chance that much needed labour legislation, particularly those pertaining to industrial safety, working conditions in factories and a minimum wage, which has been stalled for want of support in Government and industrial circles, may finally see the green light.

Too often in the past the interests of the workers who comprise nearly 800,000 people, more than half the working population of Hongkong have been neglected or even ignored. The Government wants the highest bid for its industrial sites. Factory-owners want maximum profit. They each blame the other for not being able to raise the salary of the workers or improve their working conditions.

Squeezed between these two powerful blocks who together dominate the Legislative and Executive Councils as well as control all the purse strings, the workers who have little or no leverage can count on no one to defend or champion their interests. The Labour Department does what it can but often finds its more generous proposals watered down or modified in such a way as to allow the industrialists enough leeway to totally disregard them.

The Government also has the habit of passing important labour legislations without providing the Labour Department with the means of enforcing them. In this way many a well-meaning manoeuvre of the Department directed at squeezing more concessions from the employers has come to naught.

One of the more recent examples is the provision for seven continuous rest days which is supposed to have come into effect at the

ONE MAN'S VIEW

By T. L. TSIM



A better deal for labour?

beginning of the year. It is well-known that some factory-owners and other employers have not bothered to honour such a provision which they are required to do by law. But if the workers themselves do not complain, the Labour Department is not able to do anything about it.

Lacking the necessary manpower in the inspectorate, the Department really has no idea how far their directives have been followed through at shop floor level.

One of the things that impressed me very much about China is the working conditions of its factories. I saw no less than 10 different factories in the Manchurian region, one for each important manufacturing industry, and, as I wrote last week, I found their noise level acceptable, their level of cleanliness high, and their ventilation excellent.

I had the misfortune of going into a textile knitting and weaving factory in Hongkong last year. The air was humid and foul. There were clouds of dust hanging over the place; Ventilation was practically non-existent. The machines gave out an ear-splitting noise and the floor literally shook with the rhythm of each machine movement. I came out of the

factory physically sick after only a quarter of an hour.

With conditions like these, it is little wonder that some factories, in spite of the lure of high wages, are having trouble recruiting staff.

The fact is - and we must face it - a great many youngsters would rather hawk in the streets than work in the factories. And those that do go into factories are less likely to stay on than older workers. They are also more prone to quarrel with their supervisors and to stand on their rights as workers and employees.

This is likely to be one of the most pressing problems for industry in the 1980s: how to attract and keep the services of better educated young workers, and how to make them reasonably happy in their jobs.

Many people have wondered why the Executive Council moved with the speed of lightning to endorse the action of the Education Department in closing the Golden Jubilee School, why members of Exco didn't even bother to ask any questions or to establish the facts.

The answer, I suspect, is that the Executive Council sees the actions of the protesting teachers and students as a challenge to authority, and from their

point of view, from the point of view of maintaining the status quo, that authority must be upheld.

While some of them may not care very much about the school one way or the other, they fear that students who make trouble in the classrooms will also grow up to make trouble in the factories and in society. Hence they must be stopped, they must be taught a lesson, they must learn to obey authority. That way they will grow up to be passive, obedient and subservient workers.

Naturally, this is only the pious hope of industrialists brought up on the realities of yesterday. These people often knock Britain for its bad industrial relations, low productivity and damaging strikes. They think somehow Hongkong can avoid those pitfalls. They have no idea that the sad state of industrial strife in Britain today had its roots in unenlightened labour policies in the first half of this century when over-greedy employers chose to ignore the welfare of their workers.

Ironically enough, Hongkong may be heading down the same road. If we have been able to avoid it so far, the credit should go to the Labour Department and not our beloved manufacturers.

The prosperity of Hongkong depends on our commerce and industry. In the sixties, all too often, the fruits of that prosperity had been reaped by the rich and very rich. In the MacLehose years there has been a growing tendency to plough back an increasing proportion of public funds into areas where the poor and very poor are likely to benefit most: more money for the social services, sickness and unemployment benefits, nine years free education, as well as more and better low cost housing.

Now that Jack Carter is to become Chief Secretary, this trend will continue.

It is too early to say whether Hongkong will have a comprehensive national health scheme along the lines of the National Health Service in Britain. Perhaps it is too early to say whether the workers will have a minimum wage law. Both will face strong opposition in the Legislative Council some of whose members have an uncanny ability to sway a section of the Chinese press.

But I can see Hongkong moving in that direction, as it should. Times are really changing.