

H.K. Standard 17 Sept. 1983

2,500 at rally to denounce general price increases

MORE than 2,500 people packed Victoria Park yesterday for a rally to denounce general price increases.

Another 1,000 visitors to the park also attended the rally, which was organised by 14 social groups.

A total of 19 speakers spoke under a scorching sun, calling for the establishment of a social security scheme, tighter monitoring of public utility companies and greater respect for public opinion by the government.

The rally's organisers comprised labour unions, student bodies, community and pressure groups.

They issued a statement at the end of the rally, demanding:

- A social security scheme to safeguard the livelihood of the people;

- Citizens' participation in the monitoring of public utilities;

- A freeze on all increases in taxes, fees and rents on public housing flats; and

- The setting up of citizen groups in each district to monitor the people's livelihood.

The statement was supported by 28 district board members, who were represented at the rally by Mr Ng Yat-Chiu from Kuntong.

In his opening speech, Mr Szeto Wah, who was a member of the rally presidium, said it was hoped the rally would "bear some weight" on the policy makers.

He noted that 580,000 signatures collected earlier this year could not convince the government to freeze higher charges by the two power companies.

He urged the people to take part in safeguarding their own well being and countering unreasonable price increases.

Mr Szeto told reporters afterwards that the rally was a success, and claimed that 5,000 people had attended.

Speaking on behalf of the Joint Committee for the Monitoring of Public Utilities, Mr Lau Chin-shek urged the public to exert more pressure on the government.

"It was under immense public pressure that the government published last year the once secretive Schemes of Control," he recalled.

Mr Lau said the public's well being had been seriously undermined by ever rising prices.

"The public should no longer take the passive attitude of fighting individual fare rises or companies," Mr Lau went on. "Instead, the public should recognise and fight for their rights, which is a better livelihood."

Mr Lau also urged employers to enter into a dialogue with employees to set up a social security scheme.

"We should strive for a prosperous, stable and fair society," he said.

Another speaker was Legislative Council member, Mr Allan Lee.

He said the teams providing the two power companies a 15 per cent guaranteed return had totally disregarded the actual economic situation.

Mr Lee said he did not doubt investors' right for a reasonable return. But he pointed out that during the 10 years from 1970 to 1980, net return to shareholders of the two power companies was around 16 per cent. This rose to 20 per cent

in 1980 and 24 per cent in 1981.

He predicted that it would go as high as 30 per cent in a few years' time.

"A return of 16 per cent is reasonable; for a return of 20 to 25 per cent, I would call it excessive; and for returns of above 30 per cent, that's profit gorging," he said.

Mr Lee told reporters afterwards the government should take a more flexible approach to the Schemes of Control.

He pointed out that since the Schemes of Control went into effect in the mid-70s, Hongkong had undergone an economic recession and public utilities should not be entitled to the same profit guarantee.

"The government should look for ways to change the terms of the contract with the public utilities as the economic situation has changed," he said.

Mr Lee also said that he had sensed a credibility gap between the government and the public.

"The public has the misconception that the government

Park rally speakers denounce price rises

From Page 1
The government has control over all things," he noted.

For example, Mr Lee said, the government had no influence at all on the sagging Hongkong dollar, or to stop certain speculative activities, given that Hongkong was a free economy.

Mr Lee attributed the credibility gap to a poor public relations job by the government, the inability of the press to explain the issues, and in part the reluctance of some members of the public to listen to the explanations.

Mr Lee, however, said the situation was changing gradually.

"I can see the changes going on during my five years in the Legislative Council," he said.

Commenting on the rally, the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Denis Bray, said last night the government

Turn to Page 12 Col. 2