

A lifetime of caring about the workers

PROFILE

LAU CHIN-SHEK, director of the Christian Industrial Committee.

By BERNARD FONG

“LAU Chin-shek has done more for the working people of Hongkong than anyone,” said a visitor to the cluttered Christian Industrial Committee (CIC) office.

The kudos is echoed by hundreds of thousands who recognise Mr Lau by sight from the countless protests he has led.

A joke goes: “A march is just a public gathering until Lau Chin-shek shows up.”

His flair for publicity was exhibited on Tuesday when he joined a contingent of CIC supporters and citizen group representatives at the Lower Albert Road Government headquarters to lobby the Executive Council against a proposed increase in Kowloon Canton Railway Corporation fares.

As the Governor, Sir David Wilson, and the senior Executive Councillor, Dame Lydia Dunn, entered the foyer, they were greeted by Mr Lau who pressed a petition letter on them.

But, as usual, the utility got the increase it wanted and Mr Lau and friends made it on the evening news. The futility of his actions no longer frustrates Mr Lau, who is used to having his views rejected but his sense of righteousness acknowledged.

Whether it is the Daya Bay nuclear plant or a bus company raising its fares, the resistance of the masses is only carping to official ears — or so it seems to Mr Lau.

A liberal labour activist in a place where unions are mainly ineffectual has to be gracious or philosophical about setbacks.

Mr Lau has to be, and is, persistent. From the denunciation of the 1988 White Paper and the activist mission to Beijing to canvass the National People's Congress, to complaints against the import of labour and the campaign for a Central Provident Fund, Mr Lau has always been in the vanguard.

The facade of management-labour harmony is cracking and no one knows about it better than Mr Lau, who has now taken his crusade to China.

“I was back in Guangzhou recently, after my trip to Beijing, and visited my mother who is in her 80s. Apparently someone had told her that I was in the capital petitioning the Government for the release of political prisoners and the end of political persecutions. She was quivering with fear, thinking what would become of me,” he said.

Not long ago he thought of emigration, a routine subject nowadays. With no close relations overseas and no professional skill (besides organising



labour unions, a quality which does not particularly endear him to any country), he gave up hope of emigration to the West.

Hoping that Taipei would be more amenable, he applied for the right of abode as a Chinese compatriot — only to be turned down.

“I have never had delusions about what Taiwan officials might think of me. The Taiwanese natives are being stripped of their aboriginal rights and exploited. With me in Taiwan, the Government senses that I would begin organising the indigenous people and make things difficult for them,” he said.

By choice or by lack of it, Mr Lau is destined to stay in Hongkong, a prospective martyr to conscience. His fate is now bound up with the territory, his home for the past 23 years.

Whereas some white collar weekend activists, with their foreign passports and overseas connections, are pressing for a free Hongkong Special Administrative Region out of academic interest, Mr Lau puts his future on the line.

The risk he takes has brought him the gratitude of the housing estate tenants and factory hands, his natural constituents.

He was 17 when he sneaked into Hongkong in 1966, the year of the Star Ferry riots, and began working in a textile factory.

“We, the mainland Chinese,

were bullied and exploited. The Hongkong Chinese laughed at us. We were supposed to be churlish, ignorant. We were their comic relief and we learned about discrimination first hand,” he said.

While most mainlanders were happy to assimilate, Mr Lau acted differently. Abstract issues such as justice and equal rights meant more to him than securing a job, acquiring possessions, moving up in the world and other concerns of his immigrant peers.

His talent in organisation and motivation was noticed by neighbouring associations which sprouted all over the public housing estates two decades ago.

After building up a portfolio with the Society of Community Organisations, he approached the CIC for a unionist job. “I thought my chances were very slim,” he said.

Mr Lau was nevertheless interviewed and soon given the job by then director Raymond Fung. Eight years later, Mr Lau became the CIC director.

Now, after 17 years waving placards and wailing about injustice, he is wondering about forming a liberal-labour political alliance.

However admirable his zeal and dedication, he seems a contemporary Don Quixote fighting against odds that grow longer and longer as the day of reckoning moves inexorably closer.