

Shared Values, Competing Strategies:
Uniting Movements for Democratic Rights and Collective Bargaining Rights
in Hong Kong

A Proposal for the 11th Global Labour University Conference

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Introduction

Two recent events have brought greater focus to the relationship between democratic rights and labour rights in Hong Kong: the 2013 Dockworkers Strike, the largest job action undertaken by Hong Kong workers in decades – one largely supported by complimentary civic participation, most notably by students; and the 2014 Umbrella Movement, perhaps the most significant popular protest by younger generations for increased democratic rights, which in turn gained support from Hong Kong's independent trade union movement. In light of the cooperative measures undertaken by labour and civil society during these events, there is an interest in examining possible strategies to unite the pan-democratic and independent labour movements in Hong Kong (strategies such as Social Movement Unionism are gaining traction despite difficulties experienced with this approach elsewhere). At present, democratic rights in Hong Kong are very limited, and there is no longer a law to protect collective bargaining. However, despite recent attention, attempts to unite the complimentary goals of democratic and labour rights in Hong Kong are actually longstanding, with strategies adopted and organizations founded during the later years of British colonial administration still holding relevance today.

This conference paper will discuss the relationship between the labour movement and political parties in Hong Kong, paying particular attention to the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU, the largest independent union federation advocating democratic progress in Hong Kong), the Democratic Party, and the recently-founded Labour Party. The paper will focus on a number of issues relevant to the conference theme on political and union alliances, including: risks associated with formally politicizing the labour movement (alienating workers who support labour issues, but not other positions espoused by allied political parties); competition for organizational capacity and resources between labour and political activities; and the potential marginalization of 'workers' as the primary identity of a newly imagined labour movement/democracy movement hybrid. The goal of the paper is to show how longstanding dynamics between the labour movement and political parties in Hong Kong can inform current interests in uniting demands for democratic reform and collective bargaining rights.

Note on Methodology

The paper will incorporate a comprehensive literature review of labour and political movements in Hong Kong, with particular attention to the organizational histories of the HKCTU, the Democratic Party and the Labour Party. The Labour Party, it should be noted, was founded by a leader of the HKCTU and so analysis of this relationship is expected to yield significant insights. Policy analysis will be conducted on legislative proposals introduced by these groups, with the goal of determining the impact of labour-relevant issues on political agendas. A review of industrial relations theory related to the political construction of labour policy (such as Larry Gerber's 'The Irony of State Intervention', an American and British study) will also be examined for relevance. Interviews with relevant union and political leaders will be conducted.