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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

## ITUC OnLine

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### Spotlight on Lee Cheuk-yan (HKCTU-Hong Kong)

"Chinese workers are threatened with relocation to Vietnam!"

Brussels, 9 January 2007 (ITUC OnLine): How can Chinese workers be helped to defend their rights under the dictatorship by the Chinese Communist Party? How do they view the threats of relocation to China that hang over workers throughout the world? What can the ITUC do about all this? We talk to Lee Cheuk-yan, the General Secretary of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), a key player in the struggle for a fairer globalisation and a democratic China.

What are your hopes with the creation of the ITUC?

I hope the new organisation will be stronger in terms of its representativeness and in struggling against the assaults that the current form of globalisation is making on workers' rights and livelihoods. I'm slightly worried that our principles and basic values such as solidarity, democracy and equality might be watered down within a larger organisation with more members. Basing itself on those values, the new international organisation needs to improve its profile by conducting better campaigns on workers' rights and for a fairer globalisation and mobilising its members so that they are noticed by the world leaders. The leaders need to be aware that workers are suffering but also that we are determined to change things.

With regard to China, we hope the ITUC will continue to support workers' freedom of association and fundamental human rights.

Are Chinese workers aware that relocation to China is the big threat hanging over working people all over the world?

They face the same type of threats from the capitalists, who tell Chinese workers that if they want a rise in the minimum wage or for the Chinese government to improve or apply labour legislation their firms will leave China! Vietnam is the buzzword now... so Chinese workers are hearing the same threats as others, only Vietnam is the threat to their jobs. Through the media, Hong Kong employers tell trade unionists that they will relocate if people call for an increase in the minimum wage in China. Even the very low wages in China can no longer satisfy the appetites of the capitalists! So this race to the bottom is even threatening Chinese workers, who may no longer be on the bottom rung of the ladder. We need to stop this race to the bottom and no longer see each other as threats but work out how to improve working conditions and wages worldwide through the international trade union movement. That is a very important task for the ITUC: to reverse this race to the bottom.

I hope the world will not be scared of China or Chinese workers. We think all the workers of the world have a right to economic development, growth and a better livelihood. In Hong Kong we do not want China to be seen as a threat. We would like the world to understand that Chinese workers have the same aspirations as other workers around the world,

i.e. to improve their income and daily lives and to secure respect of their rights. But the multinationals and capitalists are seizing all the profits from investment in China. Chinese workers are not a threat to anyone, but are the victims of that unbridled capitalism.

What role could the ITUC play on China? Should we engage in more dialogue with the authorities?

We hope the ITUC will be able to support Chinese workers so that they can move on from being the victims of economic policy to having a full say in how the economy is shaped. At the moment Chinese workers have no influence at all in the economy and do not even have the right to freedom of association.

As to whether or not we should engage with the authorities, it comes down to the basic principles of democracy, equality and solidarity. If we believe in those basic principles and really believe that all unions must be independent from the State and employers, we should apply them, including in our relations with China. The ACFTU (2) clearly cannot meet those criteria. Generally speaking trade unions are the last bodies to change under Communist regimes. If the regime and the general environment change the unions will change too. So we should not waste energy trying to change the ACFTU, since it is controlled by the government. Instead we should get in direct touch with workers, since they will be the agents of change in the future. We should provide more support to Chinese workers, not via the controlled unions but via the NGOs that are specialised in working with the labour movement, and by fighting at international level for the Chinese Communist Party to respect basic human rights.

How can we get direct contact with Chinese workers?

There are some NGOs in China that are used to working with the labour movement and have direct contacts with workers. Another way is to put pressure on the multinationals through framework agreements and ensure that they are respecting fundamental human rights in their factories in China. The workplace can potentially be the channel for delivering trade union education in China, but this does not have to be organised through the ACFTU, since workers are allowed to elect workers' committees that can be the seeds of future free trade unions. Those workers who want to join the ACFTU should not be a big obstacle, as long as they can become members of free trade unions at a later stage. By using those rather indirect methods we should be able to secure some changes in workplaces, which are the key battleground for the campaign.

What has been happening to human rights, and especially workers' rights, in Hong Kong since the country's return to the Chinese "fold"?

We successfully defeated the efforts of the governments of Hong Kong and China to introduce a law on subversion that would allow for the banning of any Hong Kong-based organisation that supported trade union organising in China. That law was not passed and the government of Hong Kong does not dare to reintroduce another law on subversion. We got some 700,000 people to take to the streets in a demonstration against that law in 2003. That said, workers in Hong Kong are still denied the right to vote. The election of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong 'Special Administrative Region' will take place next year and he will still be elected by just 800 people, themselves elected indirectly by some

200,000 people, though the population is 6 million. Those entitled to vote are basically capitalists and professional people. Past experience has shown that the Chinese government controls some 700 of the 800 voters, so the majority are puppets. That means the election is a sham since only a very small section of the people take part in it.

So the struggle of Hong Kong workers for full democracy is an ongoing matter, similar to the struggle of Chinese workers for freedom of association. We are asking the Chinese Government to hand back power to the Chinese people, including the right of Hong Kong workers to elect their government through universal suffrage and the right of Chinese workers to collective bargaining through the creation of free trade unions.

After the demonstration by 700,000 people in 2003, we mobilised 500,000 again in a demonstration in 2004 which forced the Chief Executive of Hong Kong to resign. Though we do not yet have a democracy we are, at least, capable of getting rid of a bad government. That said, it has been replaced by an equally bad but cleverer one. We now have a new Chief Executive but the system is the same... it is the system we are trying to change not just the government.

Hong Kong workers suffered badly from the SARS crisis. What is the current situation?

The unemployment rate hit historic levels in 2003 during the SARS crisis and the financial crisis, rising to 8.3%. It has fallen back to around 5 % today. But while the economy has improved a lot that has not helped workers: in Hong Kong, the economic growth only benefits a small section of the population since low- and unskilled workers are still facing high unemployment and very low wages. The HKCTU is campaigning for decent work through the introduction of a minimum wages in Hong Kong and rules on working time: currently there are no laws on either. Business leaders like that flexibility but as a result of the very high cost of living and low wages in Hong Kong workers have to work very long hours, some up to 16 hours a day. A quarter of the population are working over 60 hours a week.

Have you felt any threats to your work as a free trade unionist?

We are used to receiving threatening letters telling us to keep quiet but we are safe here and can carry on our fight from Hong Kong. I am rather sad that I have still not received permission to return to China since the events of Tien An Men Square. I have only been to China once since 1989, when the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Government led a delegation of 60 members of the Legislative Council, of which I am an elected member, to China in 2004. In a meeting with the Head of the Communist Party I raised the question of having a free trade union in China and they replied that China does not want another Solidarnosc or an Orange Revolution. I don't think China likes the colour orange...That is one of the colours chosen by the ITUC for its logo, so it should show it to the Chinese Government!

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

- (1) Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions,  
<http://www.hkctu.org.hk/>
- (2) The All-China Confederation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is totally

controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.

Founded on November 1 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 304 national affiliates.

<http://www.ituc-csi.org>

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