PAPERS

Union Weakness in Hong Kong: Workplace Industrial Relations and the Federation of Trade Unions

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This article examines the weakness of Hong Kong unions at the workplace, focusing on the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (FTU). The FTU has adopted a more outward-looking approach to organizing, but some question the FTU's ability to balance the effective representation of workers with its association with the government, raising the question of whether the weakness of Hong Kong unions may be attributable to continued 'industrial pacifism'. The analysis suggests that the weakness of unions at the workplace may in some cases owe something to the policies of the unions, but that in general the causes of union weakness are rather more complex. In particular, management hostility towards unions makes it difficult for them to effectively represent their members, while employee apathy is a significant problem.

Keywords: climate, dual union–organization commitment, industrial relations, union commitment, union roles

Introduction

In spite of recent increases in membership, Hong Kong unions organized only 21 percent of the workforce in 1998. While some unions have had a higher political profile in recent years, they remain weak in terms of providing effective workplace representation. Employers tend to unilaterally determine wages and conditions with little or no involvement by employees or their unions, and collective bargaining coverage is very limited, accounting for less than 5 percent of the workforce (Yeung, 1988; IHRM, 1995). In the public services, unions are involved in joint consultation (England, 1989), but even this is rare in the private sector (Yeung, 1988; Lee, 1994).

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In this article, we examine the weakness of Hong Kong unions at the workplace. We focus in particular on Hong Kong's main trade union federation, the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (FTU), and its affiliates. The traditionally pro-Communist FTU is the largest union federation in Hong Kong, with an affiliated membership of over 657,000 members in 1998. Its main rival nowadays is the pro-democracy Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU), formed in 1990 as a federation of previously independent unions, with almost 94,000 members by 1998. Historically, the Hong Kong and Kowloon Trades Union Council (TUC) was the FTU's main rival, although it has kept a low profile in recent years, not surprising given the transfer of sovereignty back to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in July 1997, which places the traditionally pro-nationalist organization in a potentially difficult position. The TUC had an affiliated membership of over 25,000 by 1998.

Both the FTU and the TUC have been accused over a number of years of largely opting out of workplace representation and taking an overly conciliatory line in labour disputes, concentrating instead on the provision of welfare services to members (Turner et al., 1980, 1991; England, 1989; Chiu and Levin, 1996). In contrast, CTU leaders have espoused a more 'independent' trade unionism, which prioritizes workers' rights over stability and industrial harmony, and they have been vociferous critics of the traditional 'industrial pacifism' of Hong Kong unions. Given the marginal position of the TUC, they have concentrated their attention on the FTU, arguing that the latter has been insufficiently vigorous in representing workers vis-a-vis their employer, particularly in labour disputes (see Snape and Chan, 1997). A particular allegation is that the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997 raises doubts about the FTU's independence from the political authorities in the PRC, with the risk that workers' interests will be sacrificed in order to maintain political and social stability in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR).

Our aim is to examine the sources of union weakness at the workplace and in particular to evaluate the role of the FTU and its affiliated unions in workplace industrial relations. As we have seen, the accusation of 'industrial pacifism' has also been levelled at the TUC, but given the relative decline of the latter, we focus our analysis mainly on the FTU. We begin by placing the FTU's current position in historical context, outlining the development of

FTU strategy since the 1940s and examining the argument that unions' weakness is attributable to the 'industrial pacifism' practised for much of this period. We then present the findings of two case studies of workplace industrial relations involving FTU affiliates in a public utility and a transport company. These organizations were chosen not for their typicality, but because they have relatively well-established unions and professionalized personnel management, in contrast to much of manufacturing and private sector services, and represent the core sectors of unionization in the private sector in Hong Kong. To the extent that we find union weakness in these sectors, we would be even more likely to find it in the private sector as a whole. The case studies draw on interviews with management and union representatives and on a survey of employees, including both union members and non-members. Of course, a comprehensive evaluation of the social and political significance of the FTU would also need to review its political role. While we make some passing reference to this, our interest in this article is with workplace industrial relations, itself a relatively neglected area of research during the past decade.[1]

The FTU in Context

The FTU was registered in April 1947. The early postwar years saw considerable industrial conflict, and the FTU and its affiliates took a lead role in this militant action. However, the tramway workers' strike of 1949–50 represented a major defeat for the unions, with the Tramway Company refusing to negotiate during the strike and with the government using the Emergency Regulations and eventually deporting the Tramway Workers' Union leaders (England, 1989: 112–13). The FTU continued its militant approach for a while, but the employers took their cue from the tramway workers' defeat and many in transport and the utilities withdrew recognition from the FTU unions and began a campaign of dismissing Communist activists. By 1952, FTU unions were losing members, in some cases to breakaway and right-wing unions, and the FTU adopted a marked change in strategy. Gone was the widespread involvement in militant industrial action and instead FTU affiliates focused on direct services and welfare, providing cash benefits, education and medical care (Ng, 1984: 20; England, 1989: 113–14).

The reaction of employers and the government to the strikes owed much to the view that the FTU action of the late 1940s was a politically inspired attempt to destabilize the colony, critical given that only by 1949 had the possibility of the People's Liberation Army overrunning Hong Kong passed. Once this threat was removed, the revolutionary ardour of FTU activists declined and the stage was set for a more moderate union strategy. It may be that the provision of welfare services was intended to serve a political function by highlighting the inequities of Hong Kong's capitalist system, and the immediate consequence was to enable the FTU to recover its lost membership (England, 1989: 116). However, in the longer term the retreat into a services-based unionism left wages and conditions of employment as a matter largely at the employer's discretion. While the unions may have gained some indirect credit for pay rises (Turner at al., 1980: 149), the strategy amounted to an implicit acceptance of unions' marginal position in most private sector workplaces (England, 1989: 117).

As export-oriented industrialization proceeded apace in the 1950s, apart from some presence in textiles, the new industries were largely non-union. A large female labour force, a preponderance of small workplaces and a need to retain flexibility and cost competitiveness in world markets certainly contributed to this state of affairs, although it is notable that the FTU, or for that matter the TUC, did little to try to organize the new manufacturing industries.

It can be argued that the FTU's strategies have owed as much to the political situation in the mainland as to the needs and aspirations of their members and the wider Hong Kong labour force. The retreat from industrial militancy and radical action in the 1950s can be seen in the context of Britain's recognition of the Communist government in 1950. The surge in labour and civil unrest in the late 1960s has been attributed in part to the FTU, under the influence of the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution in the PRC (Ng and Cheng, 1993: 217; Leung, 1994: 187). Again, from the mid-1970s the FTU adopted a more moderate stance, with Beijing's adoption of a conciliatory open door policy (Leung and Chiu, 1991: 54–5; Leung, 1994), and with the approach of the transfer of sovereignty and the UK–China Joint Declaration in 1984, the FTU made vocal commitments to the economic and social stability of the territory, including a need for cooperation and realism in the settlement of labour disputes with employers (see, for example, Hong Kong FTU, 1988: 2; Turner et al., 1991: 81).

Along with other unions, from the mid-1980s the FTU became increasingly active in politics in response to the political reforms, and the FTU has been associated with the pro-Beijing lobby and the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB). Part of the FTU's commitment to the future stability of Hong Kong has been a willingness to cooperate with other labour groups, including the pro-democracy CTU, in campaigning on labour and social policy issues. This has, however, been intermittent and has concentrated mainly on livelihood issues such as pensions and labour importation, rather than on more sensitive areas such as democratic reform, where it has tended to follow a pro-Beijing line (Levin and Chiu, 1993: 213).

Thus, the FTU is seen by many pro-democracy activists as being part of the anti-democracy establishment. Far from representing workers' rights, the argument goes, the FTU's priority is to maintain social stability. There are echoes of the traditional Communist view of unions as serving a 'productivity function' in terms of securing labour cooperation and discipline. However, we have suggested elsewhere that the Hong Kong FTU, given that it exists in a capitalist economy and that it faces competition from other unions, must be seen by workers to represent their interests. Otherwise, it will simply fail to attract and retain members (Snape and Chan, 1997). There is some evidence that FTU leaders and activists are aware of this. For example, speaking after the 1995 Annual General Meeting, FTU chairman Cheng Yiu-tong said that the role of the FTU after 1997 was:

> . . . to prevent the SAR Government from formulating wrong policies . . . unions should monitor the government . . . be brave to voice workers' demands to have an even distribution in society. The real role of unions is as the workers' representative, not the government's! (*FTU Press*, June 1995: 7)

Furthermore, since the mid-1980s, the FTU has become more active in recruitment and organizing, seeking to recruit in the white-collar and services sectors. It has developed its membership services, including its ability to assist workers in claims, disputes and accidents at work with a network of local offices. The front-line FTU officers we interviewed argued that the FTU must be able to provide real gains for workers in order to recruit and stay in competition with the CTU (Snape and Chan, 1997).

The FTU in the 1990s

During the 1990s, the FTU has seen a growth in membership and has secured an increased 'market share' of the unionized workforce (Table 1). This may reflect the more active, outgoing approach of the FTU. In our earlier article, we described how the FTU appeared to have become more active in labour disputes during the run up to the 1995 Legislative Council (LegCo)[2] election, in an attempt to gain maximum support from workers (Snape and Chan, 1997). In addition, we cannot rule out the possibility that some will have sought a closer association with the pro-Beijing FTU in the handover period. It is notable, for example, that during 1996 the FTU gained 16 new affiliates, six in the private sector and ten in the public services. It is possible that the latter represents a wish by public servants to gain greater influence with the new sovereign. Interestingly, in the first full post-handover year to the end of 1998, the FTU actually lost members and market share, in spite of continued growth in union membership (Table 1). Whether this reflects a difficulty in retaining support while being closely associated with the government remains to be seen.

There have been suggestions from its critics that the FTU is having difficulties reconciling its close association with the government with the effective representation of workers' interests. A key example concerns the repeal of the trade union laws in 1997. The general secretary of the CTU, Mr Lee Cheuk-yan, a councillor in the 1995–7 LegCo, saw his private member's bill on union rights passed on the eve of the transfer of sovereignty. The bill gave employees the right to individual representation by a union, to joint consultation where over 15 percent of the workforce are

TABLE 1
Union Affiliations and Membership, 1990–8

Year	Number of Unions		Number of Declared Members	
	Total	FTU (%)	Total	FTU (%)
1990	452	82 (18.1)	468 746	175 746 (37.5)
1995	527	97 (18.4)	591 181	222 448 (37.6)
1996	541	113 (20.9)	624 327	245 679 (39.4)
1997	538	118 (21.9)	647 908	260 118 (40.1)
1998	558	118 (21.1)	657 019	258 186 (39.3)

Source: Annual Statistical Report (various years; Registry of Trade Unions).

union members and to collective bargaining where more than 15 percent are union members and a majority express support for the union. However, the incoming SAR government eventually repealed these provisions. At least on this occasion, FTU representatives, in their support for the suspension and eventual repeal of the law, appear to have allowed their loyalty to the new sovereign to outweigh their commitment to collective bargaining, with Mr Cheng Yiu-tong, chairman of the FTU, arguing that he supported repeal on the grounds that the law would damage inter-union relations (*Ming Pao Daily News*, 28 July 1997: A4; *South China Morning Post*, 16 August 1997: 4, 30 November 1997: 6). The prospects for the re-enactment of statutory bargaining rights appear dim in the foreseeable future. The FTU's stance in this instance is not an isolated incident, and the CTU's Lee Chuk-yan has accused the FTU's Tam Yiu-chung of being a 'defender of the Government' and a 'betrayer of the working class' (*Ming Pao*, 20 April 1998: A7).

The FTU leadership's loyalty to the pro-China camp was rewarded in 1997 when Mr Tam Yiu-chung, the FTU's vice chairman, was included in the new SAR government's Executive Council (ExCo). Since the transfer of sovereignty, the FTU has thus pursued what might be termed a 'corporatist' approach, seeking influence with the government emphasizing the need for economic stability as a basis for prosperity, and supporting the government rather than the other labour organizations on certain issues.

The Sources of Union Weakness

There are several possible explanations for union weakness in Hong Kong. Management resistance to union organization in the face of no legal obligation to recognize has been cited as a key problem for unions in Hong Kong (Levin and Ng, 1995: 131). Several of the larger enterprises discontinued collective negotiations with FTU affiliates following the industrial strife of the early 1950s and late 1960s, so that, for example in the public utility companies, unions with significant membership are often denied formal employer recognition (Turner et al., 1991: 82). As mentioned earlier, the industrial structure has also been important. The growth of manufacturing industry in Hong Kong was characterized by small firms, a largely female labour force and exposure to keen international competition, factors which are not necessarily conducive

to union organization. This is reflected in the fact that the greater part of Hong Kong union membership is concentrated in relatively 'sheltered' sectors such as the civil and public services and in transport and the utility companies, where workplaces are often larger and the workforce more stable and highly educated.

It has also been suggested that cultural factors have been important. This is reflected in the 'Neo-Confucian' hypothesis, which suggests that workers in Chinese societies will accept authoritarian management and avoid confrontation with the employer (Hiu and Tan, 1996), and with the notion of 'utilitarian familism', which suggests that Hong Kong workers adopt a strategy of seeking advancement for themselves and their family, eschewing class-based forms of collective action (Wong and Liu, 1994: 79). Such cultural arguments imply that the demand for collective representation is absent.

However, according to the findings of Turner et al. (1980, 1991) there appears to be a demand for some form of workplace representation. Their 1985 survey of employees found that 31 percent preferred 'joint consultation with workplace representatives', 32 percent preferred legislation and 12 percent trade union negotiation as a means of winning improved working conditions. Thus, Chiu and Levin (1996) suggest that the FTU, by opting out of workplace representation, has effectively failed the Hong Kong workforce:

> The evidence seems to suggest that a substantial representation and participation gap exists in Hong Kong. If so, then it is not primarily the value orientations of workers that impede the institutionalisation of political rights in enterprise governance but rather the decisions by the FTU and TUC to avoid issues of shop-floor empowerment. (Chiu and Levin, 1996: 33)

The suggestion is that the FTU and their traditional rivals the TUC are themselves partly to blame for the underdevelopment of trade union power in Hong Kong, since their industrial pacifism has failed to mobilize workers and effectively represent their interests vis-a-vis their employers. In the case of the TUC, this continues to be the case and the transfer of sovereignty may pose additional problems for the traditionally pro-nationalist organization (Snape and Chan, 1997). Our main concern in this article is with the extent to which the FTU, which has shown signs of adopting a more active and outward-looking approach in recent years, is able to represent its members effectively in the workplace.

In the remainder of this article, we provide some evidence on the conduct of FTU affiliates at the workplace, drawing on two case studies. The cases shed further light on the nature and causes of union weakness, focusing in particular on management and union strategies and on the attitudes of workers.

Company A – A Public Utility

Company A was a listed company, employing over 2000 people in Hong Kong. It was a public utility. In recent years, demand from the company's customers had stagnated, not least because of the decline of the manufacturing sector in Hong Kong, and this had necessitated some restructuring of the workforce, which is still ongoing.

There was one main trade union at Company A, established in the late 1940s and affiliated to the FTU. The union represented over 35 percent of all employees at the company, with membership concentrated mainly among blue-collar and junior white-collar workers, although with some members among supervisors and professional engineers. Traditionally, management's attitude towards the union had been one of avoidance and there was no collective agreement or other formalized relationship between company and union. However, the personnel manager claimed to have tried to develop a more constructive relationship with the union in recent years, which he described as 'cordial'. The company provided union officials with time off to conduct union business and there were union noticeboards at all the main workplaces, although no office facilities were provided. There was no formal schedule of union–management meetings, but management met with union officials on request, usually three or four times a year. For example, each spring the union approached management with their annual pay claim and management met them to discuss this. The primary contact was between members of the union executive and the personnel manager and her or his staff. There was usually no direct contact between union officials and line managers.

Management were at pains to point out that the relationship was not one of collective bargaining and the union's officials argued that this lack of formal recognition stood in the way of the development of stable industrial relations. They had been attempting to place the

relationship on a more formal basis, for example by requesting that their secretary be allowed to take minutes of union–management meetings and seeking to develop the union role as a communications channel between management and employees. Management had so far strongly resisted such pressures.

Interestingly, the personnel manager was of the view that the direct services offered by the FTU and the union were the key reason why staff, and particularly white-collar staff, joined the union:

> So the employees joining the union, many of them are not necessarily looking for a unionized approach to the company. They rather enjoy the discount, benefits, and other welfare activities. But having said that, the company . . . some ten years ago, established a staff sports and recreation club, with the aim to counter-balance the union's influence. So, this sports and recreation club also offers similar activities, and then . . . each employee will be given a subsidy, could be $10 per month per employee, and this money will go to the sports and recreation club to organize activities. We just want to dilute the influence of the union.

The union officials we interviewed at Company A were certainly aware of this competition, and we have encountered similar thinking in other large organizations in Hong Kong.

There was an informal consultative committee, with the personnel manager, departmental heads and employee representatives, chosen by management and not necessarily union members. There were briefings for staff by personnel and departmental managers on new company policies from time to time. The company had a formal grievance procedure for individuals. According to the personnel manager, union officials did not accompany members through this process. Union officials argued that they encouraged members with grievances to use the company procedures in the first instance, going to their supervisors and if necessary using the grievance procedure. Only once a problem could not be resolved in this way would the union normally take up the issue with the personnel department. Judging from our interviews with union officials, the union was anxious not to upset relations with supervisors and with the company.

The company had been free of significant industrial disputes in recent years, with no strikes or other industrial action. The union's approach was to survey their members on issues of concern and to present this to the company to try to exert pressure, sometimes also publishing articles in the press. The nature of the company as a relatively stable, high-paying employer, with highly skilled jobs,

appeared to have exerted a moderating influence on the workforce and the union. However, a major issue now facing the union was the restructuring of the company. The company assured the union that the necessary adjustments could be made by natural wastage, redeployment and retraining, but this was likely to be the key industrial relations issue in the coming years.

As part of our study, we conducted an employee survey, covering unit heads, engineers, officers, clerical and secretarial staff, technicians, crafts workers and fitters. Questionnaires were received from 396 employees, representing a response rate of 48 percent.

In spite of the apparently cordial relations between management and the union, the restructuring exercise appeared to have had a negative impact on employee perceptions of industrial relations at Company A. We asked several questions about the state of labour–management relations within the company. The results are shown in Table 2. A majority of respondents disagreed that management was making decisions in the best interests of all employees and felt that there was distrust between workers and management in the company. Many felt that the relationship between management and workers was hostile. However, fewer than a third agreed that day-to-day relations were poor and many felt that there was cooperation and mutual respect between management and workers.

Survey respondents were asked to provide their further written comments at the end of the questionnaire. Out of a total response of 396 completed questionnaires, 79 (almost 20 percent) provided such comments. A systematic content analysis of these responses was performed. What emerged from this analysis was that respondents perceived things to have changed for the worse at Company A, in terms of pay and benefits and the rapid pace of restructuring and organizational change. Retrenchment was leading to a feeling of job insecurity among staff. Employees perceived increased workload and job pressure, which some attributed to a shortage of staff. Management and supervisors came in for criticism for allegedly following the 'dictates' of the company without concern for the well-being of employees. All this, according to our respondents, led to lower morale and loyalty to the company and the resignation of experienced staff.

Judging from respondents' comments, employees felt that the company did not really take their views into account. Management attempts at consultation, either with the trade union or with individual employees, were dismissed as superficial. Employees clearly

TABLE 2
Employee Relations Climate (in percentages)

	Company A			Company B		
	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree
Workers and management distrust one another	19	26	56	24	16	60
The relationship between workers and management is hostile	28	27	45	38	16	45
Workers and management try to cooperate as much as possible	29	29	42	40	21	40
Workers and management respect each other	33	26	41	45	14	41
I think management makes decisions in the best interests of all employees	56	19	25	62	15	23
Day-to-day relations between workers and management are poor	37	33	30	38	20	42

TABLE 3
Overall, How Satisfied Are You With Your Union? (in percentages)

Company A

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
4	23	46	24	3

Note: Includes the 194 respondents who are members of the main Company A union. Excludes the three members of other unions.

Company B

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
a. Members of the left-wing union only ($N = 103$)				
5	23	40	27	6
b. Members of the right-wing union only ($N = 18$)				
18	0	59	12	12

wished to have greater communication and consultation. In this context some respondents called for closer communication between management and the trade union and for the trade union to do more to represent the interests of employees.

In spite of employees' concerns about recent developments at the company, most were not currently enthusiastic about the trade union. Of our questionnaire sample, 49 percent were members of the union, with a further three respondents claiming to be members of another union. Looking at the union members in our sample, when asked about their level of satisfaction with their union, many appeared indifferent, with 27 percent expressing satisfaction and an equal number expressing dissatisfaction (Table 3).

Looking at the attitudes of union members of Company A towards their organization (Table 4), a majority felt that things would have been far worse for the workers at Company A if not for the union. Even among non-members, almost a third agreed with this proposition. However, a majority of members agreed that there was little to be gained by joining the union and it seems that most did not enthusiastically recommend their colleagues to join. While 52 percent said that they cared about the union's survival, overall, the responses in Table 4 suggest that the level of commitment to the union was limited. Respondents' extended written

TABLE 4
Commitment to the Union (in percentages)

	Company A (Union Members Only)[a]			Company B (Left-Wing Union Members Only)		
	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree
I feel proud of the union	43	26	31	45	20	35
I recommend [the union] to my colleagues as a great organization to be a member of	34	27	39	25	29	46
My values and [the union's] values are very similar	36	25	309	34	29	36
I feel very little loyalty to [the union]	31	23	47	27	15	58
There is little to be gained by joining [the union]	20	19	61	28	9	63
I don't care if [the union] survives	52	22	26	57	16	27
Things would have been far worse for the workers at Company A/B over the last few years if it hadn't been for [the union]	20	20	60	11	15	75

[a] The figures for Company A include the 194 respondents who are members of the Company A union, and exclude the three members of other unions.

comments were consistent with this interpretation, recognizing the weakness of the union in terms of low membership density, employee apathy and management's reluctance to negotiate. Some were also critical of the union for not doing more to communicate with its members and for not being more proactive on recruitment.

Company B – A Transport Undertaking

Company B was a bus company employing over 2000 staff. There were two trade unions, the main one being a company branch of the FTU-affiliated Motor Transport Workers' General Union (the 'left-wing' union), with well over 1500 members in the company,[3] and a much smaller TUC-affiliated union with fewer than 100 members (the 'right-wing' union). Union membership had been broadly stable in recent years. The left-wing union claimed to represent almost 90 percent of drivers and three-quarters of workshop fitters, the two main employee groups, along with smaller numbers of regulators, inspectors, clerks and unskilled workers.

Unusually for Hong Kong, the company had recognized the unions and negotiated over terms and conditions of employment. Management had regular meetings with each of the unions separately (they had historically refused to meet management together), dealing with operational issues such as work schedules, staffing, safety and hygiene, and the payment of allowances. Management was usually represented by the personnel manager, the traffic and engineering managers, a personnel officer and sometimes another line manager where the issues being discussed require it. The union side was represented by the elected officials, in the case of the left-wing union a five-person negotiating team drawn from the union's standing committee. Such regular meetings were a recommendation of the consultant who had advised the company on improved employee communications following a strike several years earlier. There were also meetings held to deal with policy issues, such as the annual pay increase and employment benefits. Such meetings usually also involved at least one of the directors and perhaps also the finance manager. Union–management meetings were formally minuted by the personnel manager and circulated to both sides. Collective agreements were signed on such matters as the annual pay deal and other changes in terms and conditions. In addition, union representatives dealt directly with departmental managers

on issues of local concern, approaching the personnel manager only if the issue could not be resolved locally.

Overall, union negotiations covered the whole range of terms and conditions, including pay, bonuses, hours, retirement provisions, hours of work, holidays, working practices and staffing levels. The left-wing union in particular had a high level of density and, according to the personnel manager, it could often muster strong support from its members and had in the past mounted strike action. Collective bargaining appeared to be vigorous, for example with the union winning significant improvements in retirement benefits, holidays in advance of statutory requirements, extended meal breaks and, of course, attempting to drive a hard bargain in the annual pay negotiations. The left-wing union was the more significant of the two, given the long-term decline of the TUC affiliate and its relative inactivity. According to the personnel manager, the negotiation process usually involved direct discussion with the left-wing union first and then presentation of the agreement to the right-wing union for endorsement. In some cases, the latter had refused to do so, but the deal had been implemented regardless of this.

Union noticeboards were provided in all workplaces and were open to both unions. Union officials were paid for meetings, whether or not they were held during office hours, and officials of the left-wing union had even been paid by the company while on union visits into the PRC.

The company did not have an overall employee involvement strategy. Departments issued their own staff newsletters and there was a plan to consolidate these into a company newsletter in the future, but there were no consultative or briefing mechanisms independent of the union and management had generally accepted the union's role as the representative of the workforce.

As the more active of the two unions, the left-wing union claimed to expend a great deal of effort in representing members, not only collectively but also individually. Union representatives at workplace level assisted members in discussion with their supervisor and the union negotiated settlements with the company on behalf of disciplined or dismissed workers. In addition, the left-wing union, both independently and through the FTU, provided a wide range of direct services to members, ranging from discounted travel and tours, to visits and assistance for sick members, to cash death benefits. As an FTU affiliate, the union was also involved in social and political activities, for example raising funds for

educational projects in the PRC, participating in activities to celebrate the return of sovereignty in 1997 and more general political lobbying. The impression, then, was of a relatively active organization, placing a great deal of emphasis on representing members' interests, both in the workplace and beyond.

As in the earlier case study, our study of Company B involved an employee survey, including drivers, workshop crafts workers and technicians, clerical and secretarial staff, regulators and inspectors. Completed questionnaires were received from 153 employees, representing an effective response rate of 13 percent.[4]

In terms of their perceptions of the employee relations situation at Company B (see Table 2), as in the earlier case, respondents disagreed that management decisions were in the best interests of all employees, and again a majority felt that there was mistrust between management and workers. Forty-two percent claimed that day-to-day relations were poor, rather higher than in Company A (30 percent) and perhaps a reflection of the more militant union presence in the workplace. Looking at the written comments of staff (65 respondents chose to provide such comments on their questionnaires), there was a strong impression of staff dissatisfaction with the company and its management. Management was seen as old-fashioned and as lacking modern management methods, as weak and ineffective and as exercising favouritism in dealing with employees. All this was said to have resulted in poor morale among employees, poor discipline and inefficient working practices.

Over 67 percent of our respondents were members of the left-wing union and 12 percent belonged to the right-wing union.[5] As in Company A, members' satisfaction with their union was generally limited (Table 3). We asked a series of questions on attitudes to the majority, left-wing union.[6] Table 4 summarizes the views of members towards the union. Seventy-five percent of members felt that things would have been far worse at Company B if not for the union. Even among respondents who were not members of the left-wing union, 46 percent agreed with this statement and only 32 percent disagreed. This suggests that there was a widespread perception among employees that the union had made tangible gains on their behalf, rather more so than at Company A, and probably a reflection of the collective bargaining role of unions at Company B. However, 63 percent of members agreed that there was little to be gained by joining the left-wing union, while 70 percent of non-members held such a view.

In respondents' written comments, some said that the left-wing union was ineffective and lacked a clear negotiating strategy, only pushing for improvements when pressured to do so by members. Others, however, accused it of being too militant and of pushing for gains without regard for the long-term survival of the company. The union was seen by several as having poor communications with members, and white-collar staff accused it of attending mainly to the interests of blue-collar members and neglecting the interests of its salaried members, perhaps not surprising given the numerical dominance of the blue-collar membership. Overall, the results showed higher levels of commitment to the left-wing union at Company B than at Company A, although there was still evidence of some disillusionment with the organization.

Dual Commitment to Company and Union

The employee survey questionnaires at Company A and Company B allow us to explore the pattern of employee commitment. The US literature has long been interested in the extent to which the employer and the union compete for the commitment or loyalty of employees, or alternatively whether it is possible for employees to commit to both – usually referred to as 'dual commitment' or 'dual loyalty' (Stagner, 1954; Gordon and Ladd, 1990).

We measured commitment to company and to union by taking an average score across a number of questionnaire items similar to those used by Martin and Peterson (1987) and Bemmels (1995). The company commitment items included: 'I am proud to tell others that I work for [Company A/B]'; 'My values and [Company A/B's] values are very similar'; and 'I feel very little loyalty to [Company A/B]' (reverse scored). Union commitment was measured with the items shown in Table 4. Responses to all items were made on a seven-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (scored as 1) to 'strongly agree' (scored as 7), so that higher scores indicate higher levels of commitment.[7] The questions were specifically intended to measure the 'loyalty' or affective dimension of commitment (Gordon et al., 1980). As in the studies by Gallagher (1984) and Conlon and Gallagher (1987), where necessary we slightly amended the wording of some of the union commitment items so that they could meaningfully be answered by members and non-members.

We found that company and union commitment was positively

correlated in both samples (correlation coefficients: Company A = .20, $p < .001$; Company B = .40, $p < .001$). This implies that an increase in commitment to the union does not necessarily imply a reduction in commitment to the company – quite the reverse – so that commitment to the union does not necessarily imply disloyalty to the company. In Table 5, we categorize respondents according to whether they show high or low commitment to company and union, deriving four groups by splitting the sample at the neutral midpoints of the two scales.

In both samples, around a third of total respondents were either dual loyalists (showing high levels of commitment to both company and union) or union loyalists (showing high commitment to union but not to company),[8] indicating a minority but significant level of commitment to the unions among employees. Not surprisingly, among union members this proportion rose in both companies to over two-fifths. Unilateral company loyalists were in a minority in both companies, especially in Company B, where only 10 percent fell into this category. However, the largest group were those respondents with low levels of commitment to both company and union, a group we label the 'dual disaffecteds'.[9] Comparing union members and non-members, members included a rather higher proportion of union loyalists and dual loyalists. However, non-union members differed from members mainly in terms of the proportion of respondents having low levels of commitment to both company and union. In company B, surprisingly, the union members even included a slightly higher proportion of company loyalists than did non-members.

Discussion

Company A illustrates the classic union marginalization strategy, with the company only recognizing the union's existence on a de facto basis, refusing to formally negotiate, emphasizing non-union communication channels and competing with the union on the services function. Relations were seen by both sides as 'cordial', with the granting of access to management representatives and the provision of basic facilities for union officials. The union appeared not to want to antagonize management, particularly in its apparent reluctance to become more involved in individual grievance handling.

TABLE 5
Analysis of Company and Union Commitment Patterns (by number and percentages)

	Commitment		Company A			Company B		
	Union	Company	Full Sample	Union Members	Non-Members	Full Sample	Union Members	Non-Members
Dual disaffecteds	Low	Low	154 (42%)	69 (38%)	83 (45%)	83 (56%)	52 (47%)	31 (82%)
Company loyalists	Low	High	93 (25%)	32 (18%)	58 (32%)	15 (10%)	12 (11%)	3 (8%)
Union loyalists	High	Low	59 (16%)	43 (24%)	16 (9%)	30 (20%)	29 (26%)	1 (3%)
Dual loyalists	High	High	63 (17%)	37 (20%)	26 (14%)	21 (14%)	18 (16%)	3 (8%)

Note: The sample is split on each dimension at the scale midpoint equivalent score (4 on a 1–7 scale).

Employees were rather apathetic towards the union, recognizing its limited influence, especially in the face of management's reluctance to negotiate. While most felt that the union had contributed to their welfare, they were sceptical about the benefits to the individual of joining. Some were critical of both management and the union, particularly as regards communication, and while they were happy enough with their jobs and day-to-day relations with management, the restructuring had led to anxiety and to discontent with general management decisions. The union appeared not to have tapped into this discontent as a source of support.

The case suggests that in Hong Kong, even in larger organizations with a stable labour force and a long-established union presence, it is difficult to pursue the job-based functions effectively in the face of management resistance, although it is possible that the union was contributing to its own ineffectiveness because of a reluctance to vigorously champion employee grievances, particularly given the evidence of widespread discontent and poor morale among employees.

Company B was relatively unusual for Hong Kong in having established workplace union organization and effective collective bargaining between management and unions. Management–union relations had not always been cordial. In this case, multi-unionism was not usually a major issue, given the weakness of the right-wing union, and although management 'gave face' to the latter by meeting with them to discuss proposed changes in terms and conditions, it was often once an agreement had been reached with the stronger left-wing union. In practice, many members of the right-wing union appeared to recognize the limited effectiveness of their organization and were also members of the majority organization. We have remarked upon the relative inactivity of the TUC and its affiliates elsewhere (Snape and Chan, 1997), and this case suggests that this may extend even into workplaces where such unions are recognized by management, a view which is consistent with Turner et al.'s (1991: 83) assessment. Furthermore, the left-wing union officials we interviewed claimed that the right-wing union often assisted management's case by arguing for a more moderate approach in negotiations. There is clearly strong evidence of industrial pacifism on the part of this TUC affiliate.

The collective bargaining relationship at Company B was a long-standing one, and management had largely accepted the union as the main communication channel with the workforce. In contrast to

Company A, there was little concerted effort to compete with the union in terms of employee involvement or the provision of welfare services. In Company B, in spite of the widespread criticism of the company and of management, commitment to the left-wing union was often less than enthusiastic, even among members. As in Company A, even union members claimed that there was little to be gained by joining the union, in spite of the perceived impact of the union on employee welfare.

In both of the case studies, the view of Hong Kong employees as satisfied workers, in harmony with their employer, is called into question. Widespread employee dissatisfaction with management conduct was apparent, but this appeared not to result in strong unilateral commitment to the union, and there was evidence of an apathetic attitude towards both company and union. Indeed, commitment to company and union was positively correlated. However, in Company B, where the union was able to pursue its job-based functions more effectively, relatively high levels of union density had been achieved.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the reasons for union weakness at the workplace. In particular, we have reviewed the argument that Hong Kong unions have traditionally underemphasized their workplace functions and that this 'industrial pacifism' has been one of the reasons for the limited development of effective trade union representation in Hong Kong workplaces. This argument has been applied to both of the long-established federations, the FTU and the TUC, but given the obvious continued inactivity of the TUC, we chose to focus our attention on the FTU. While by the 1990s, the FTU had adopted a more outward-looking approach to organizing and FTU affiliations and membership had increased relative to the Hong Kong total, some still question the FTU's ability to balance the effective representation of workers with its close association with the SAR government and its commitment to economic stability.

We have been particularly concerned with workplace representation, and what emerges from our analysis is that union weakness appears to be the result of a combination of factors, of which union policy is just one. Thus, the FTU unions we studied faced

difficulties in effectively representing their members. In particular, management resistance to union influence, even to the extent of trying to compete with the union on the services function, emerges as a problem for unions. Employee apathy towards unions was also a key issue, and employee grievances may result in dual apathy towards company and union, rather than in greater support for the union. Our analysis of commitment to company and unions suggests that the largest group of employees, particularly in Company B, can be described as 'dual disaffecteds', with low levels of commitment to both company and union. However, where employees are committed, our findings suggest that union commitment does not necessarily come at the expense of commitment to the company. There is thus no evidence that union membership or commitment to the union represent an expression of disloyalty to the company.

As we have seen, an apathetic response from employees towards unions has been interpreted by some as a culturally conditioned fatalism and a resistance to collective action on the part of Hong Kong workers (Chiu and Levin, 1996). In this study, we have not tested this directly, although it is notable that our finding of a majority of 'dual disaffecteds' is similar to Guest and Dewe's (1991) finding in UK electronics companies, suggesting that this is not necessarily a culturally specific phenomenon. It is difficult to compare the pattern of commitment across studies, due to the use of differing commitment scales. However, the results shown in Table 6, taken from two studies which provide such a breakdown and use affective or value-based commitment scales as we do, suggest that Hong Kong workers are no less likely than those in other countries to express loyalty to their union. Indeed, a comparison of these figures with those for union members in Table 5 shows that in these samples the Hong Kong union members express greater loyalty to the union and less loyalty to the employer than do these US and Swedish members. Such comparisons are flawed, not least because of the highly specific samples involved, but the data provide no evidence of a culturally conditioned resistance to union loyalty among Hong Kong workers. What is clear is that our evidence contradicts the notion that Hong Kong workers are a highly satisfied group, with high affective commitment to their employer.

In addition to the difficulties faced in winning employer recognition and in influencing terms and conditions, the unions face an additional difficulty. The case studies provide an indication of a

TABLE 6
Commitment Patterns: Some Comparisons

	Commitment		Magenau et al. (1988)[a]	Sverke and Sjoberg (1994)[b]
	Union	Company	(%)	(%)
Dual disaffecteds	Low	Low	39–41	38
Company loyalists	Low	High	28–35	53
Union loyalists	High	Low	14–20	2
Dual loyalists	High	High	11–12	7

[a] US rank-and-file union members in a Mid-West local (measures taken in two time periods, hence we show a range).
[b] Swedish public sector white-collar workers (union members).
Note: As in Table 5, the sample is split on each dimension at the scale midpoint equivalent score.

possible free-rider mentality towards union membership. In both cases, more respondents agreed than disagreed with the proposition that things would have been far worse for workers at their company if not for the unions[10] and yet a majority, even of union members, agreed that there was little to be gained by joining the union. The former statement may reflect the perceived public good benefits of the unions' communication and collective representation role, which are available to individuals regardless of their membership status. Such an interpretation implies that the direct union services, such as excludable private goods, are not necessarily providing the membership incentive which we might have expected (Olson, 1965).[11] In Company A, this is perhaps understandable, given the employer's determination to compete in this area, but there was no such competition in Company B. Union subscriptions are at present usually very low in Hong Kong, and some have argued that there is a need to increase them if unions are to be placed on a sounder financial footing. However, the lukewarm evaluation of the individual net benefits of joining the union suggests that there is a need to be cautious about this.

There was evidence that the weakness of unions at the workplace owes at least something to the policies of the unions themselves. Thus, respondents at both companies felt that their unions did not communicate with members sufficiently, and at Company A, members' comments suggested that their apathetic attitude was to some extent linked to the perceived ineffectiveness of the union.

Again in Company A, it seems that the union might have been able to gain more support from employees by expending greater effort in representing individuals in grievance cases. However, even at Company B, where the union was significantly more active and vociferous, employee apathy remained a problem, suggesting that there are factors other than union policy at work. Management resistance to unions also has a key role to play, not least in making it difficult for unions to demonstrate positive net benefits to members. Furthermore, we cannot rule out the possibility that the relative inactivity of the union at Company A is in part a *consequence* of management resistance to the union's taking a bigger role. In sum, while industrial pacifism may explain union weakness in particular cases, our view is that it fails to provide a sufficient general explanation, and that management resistance to unions is a key factor. While employee apathy is widespread, this appears not to be attributable to a generalized cultural resistance to trade unions among Hong Kong workers in particular, and may to some extent reflect a recognition of union ineffectiveness in the face of management resistance.

Of course, we must avoid an overly pessimistic view of the future of trade unions in Hong Kong. Our second case study (Company B) suggests that higher levels of union density and commitment are feasible where the union has employer recognition and is able to demonstrate that it is capable of making gains on behalf of the workforce. Hong Kong employees have shown a propensity to join a union and to support industrial action when their interests are threatened, as witnessed by the examples of schoolteachers (Law, 1988) and Cable and Wireless staff in the 1970s, Mass Transit Railway (MTRC) staff (Kong, 1988) and social workers (Mak, 1988) in the 1980s, and more recently in the Aberdeen Tunnel dispute, at Cathay Pacific, at the bus companies and in the postal and fire services.[12] Such disputes have often provided the initial impetus to union organization, and in some cases the initial substantive grievance was then linked with the issue of union representation. Circumstances such as those in Company A, where restructuring is anticipated and feelings of insecurity and job pressure are likely to increase still further, may well provide a basis for union support. In spite of the problems facing unions, it is difficult to argue that they are destined to ineffectiveness simply by virtue of the cultural characteristics of the Hong Kong workforce. Employer attitudes, government policy, the political context, the stock of employee

grievances as well as the strategies of unions themselves are likely to influence their future.

It may be that similar findings would emerge in other Asian cultures. The growth in independent trade unions since the 1980s in several Asian countries and regions, including South Korea and Taiwan, suggests that this is the case (Frenkel, 1993). The development of independent unions has been associated with the emergence of more open government, with democratization in South Korea and the end of martial law in Taiwan. Similarly, Hong Kong unions were able to increase their membership and density in the politically charged atmosphere of the early 1990s. The pace of democratization is now rather slower, but the success of the pro-democracy forces in the 1998 LegCo election and the return of labour representatives[13] suggests that labour and welfare issues continue to arouse interest and controversy, suggesting that public support will be forthcoming for many of the issues which unions have championed. Of course, much of the running in terms of political action and industrial militancy has been made by the pro-democracy CTU (Snape and Chan, 1997). However, particularly in the face of the CTU's example, the FTU and its affiliates risk losing credibility and support, politically and in the workplace, if they are seen as being too submissive to employers, and to the Hong Kong SAR and Chinese governments.

Research on the ex-Communist unions in St Petersburg has suggested that they were able to move away from their former preoccupation with productivity enhancement and welfare services, to play a stronger role in employee representation (Jones, 1995). The Hong Kong FTU has also set its sights on playing a much more active role than in the past. However, on our evidence the extent to which FTU unions will be able to effectively represent their members in the workplace will depend crucially on their ability to counter management resistance to their playing an active role.

Appendix: Abbreviations Used in the Text

CTU	Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions
DAB	Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong
FLU	Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions
FTU	Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions
LegCo	Legislative Council

PRC People's Republic of China
SAR Special Administrative Region
TUC Hong Kong and Kowloon Trades Union Council

Notes

1. Little research has been done on workplace industrial relations since the major studies of Turner and his colleagues in the late 1970s and 1980s (Turner et al., 1980, 1991).

2. The Legislative Council is Hong Kong's legislature. The last years of British rule saw an increase in the elected component of LegCo, and the pace of democratization was and remains an issue of contention between the pro-democracy and conservative forces. On the transfer of sovereignty to the PRC in July 1997, the existing councillors, who included several vocal pro-democracy activists and unionists, were replaced by a Provisional LegCo, pending the first post-handover election in May 1998.

3. The Motor Transport Workers' General Union had a total membership of almost 27,000, across the transport sector, including buses, public light buses, taxis and haulage.

4. This response rate is rather lower than that achieved in Company A. This may reflect the nature of the workforce at Company B, with a high proportion of drivers and workshop-based fitters. Company A, in contrast, has a high proportion of desk-based personnel, perhaps providing a more favourable environment for the completion and return of a postal questionnaire.

5. Six of the 18 members of the right-wing union were also members of the left-wing union.

6. In all these questions, respondents were asked to consider the left-wing union.

7. Commitment to the company was measured with six items, with an alpha of .82 in Company A and .71 in Company B. Union commitment was measured with seven items, with alphas of .87 and .90 respectively in the two companies.

8. The analysis for union members in Company B was conducted for all members, including those of the FTU and TUC affiliates and joint members. An analysis for FTU affiliate members alone produced very similar results. Given the small numbers of employees in the TUC union, no separate analysis was attempted for this group.

9. The dual loyalists and company loyalists had significantly higher levels of company commitment than did the trade union loyalists and dual disaffecteds. Similarly, the dual and trade union loyalists had higher levels of union commitment. These tests were one-way analyses of variance with multiple comparisons (Scheffe) tests for differences among the four groups. The reported differences are significant at the 5 percent level or better.

10. In Company A, 45 percent agreed and 24 percent disagreed. In Company B, the figures were 65 and 18 percent respectively.

11. In this research, our primary aim was to examine employee commitment to the union and to the employer. Hence, we used standard questionnaire items. Unfortunately, due to limits on the length of the questionnaire, we were not able to include specific questions on the reasons for joining or not joining the union.

12. In the public sector, strikes have tended to concern attempts by individual grades to win improved pay and conditions (e.g. schoolteachers and social workers). During the 1980s, several major strikes in the private sector concerned imposed changes in working conditions, which were then linked to union bids to win recognition (e.g. Cable and Wireless and MTRC). In more recent years, issues such as redundancy and wage reductions have led to strikes in the private sector.

13. In the LegCo election of May 1998, FTU candidates won four seats (Tam Yiu-chung, Chan Yuen-han, Chan Wing-chan and Chan Kwok-keung). Candidates specifically associated with the CTU won two seats (Lau Chin-sek and Lee Chuek-yan), the Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions (FLU; a federation of small unions which has been associated with the CTU) one seat (Lee Kai-ming), and four other pro-democracy candidates with trade union backgrounds were elected (Szeto Wah, Cheung Man-kwong, Ho Man-ka and Leung Yiu-chung). In total, 11 councillors can be considered to come from a trade union background.

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