

IS A GENERAL STRIKE IN THE OFFING ?

Say what one may about the British and their suggested, outmoded, colonial ways, but the one thing about which one cannot criticise is the excellent British administration of government -- at least, most of the time.

During the years that the British controlled Hongkong, the wheels of the British-Hongkong Government were smoothly oiled, and the 180,000-odd civil servants had but a very few legitimate complaints -- at least, if they did have complaints, they did not voice them very vociferously.

Since June 30, 1997, however, it would appear that things have not gone as well, in the administration of the Hongkong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), as when the British ruled the roost.

At least, that could be one of the interpretations of the present unrest in labour camps, throughout many Government and non-Government organisations.

There have been incessant arguments between one HKSAR Government department and another, during the past few months, culminating, just last week, in suggestions of civil disobedience in the uniformed branches of Government -- police, correctional services, immigration, customs, etc.

And then, last Sunday, it was estimated that about 20,000 civil servants, from some 109 labour unions, swarmed into Central, protesting about their lot and what some of them called, the unreasonable Civil Service Reforms.

Just prior to the latest outcry, which was, without question, the loudest and most frightening, Citibus Group Ltd drivers made it clear that they were not happy with their lot, and, as a result, they determined to work to rule.

Kowloon Motor Bus (KMB) drivers joined in the fracas and said that they supported the Citibus drivers' protest. What this may mean remains to be seen.

But for sure, it could never be considered a good omen because it must indicate that the drivers at KMB are, also, not very happy with their lot: They, too, look militant.

Question: When will KMB drivers stand up and make demands of Management.

Then, there is the matter of the pilots at Cathay Pacific Airways, and their complaints about pay, benefits, long working hours, etc.

This is an old chestnut, however, but it has peaked of late with something in the neighborhood of 50 percent of all flights, having to be cancelled just last weekend.

These are very major, labour issues and cannot be shrugged off as being other examples of labour's unreasonable demands on Management -- because these problems must have been hatching for some time.

These problems could not have erupted overnight.

Without harping on the validity of any of the labour complaints, an attack could, and perhaps should, be launched against the HKSAR branch of Government which brought about the present impasse between Government and a great number of its employees.

The problems in Government, with regard to labour complaints, are not new; but, in living history, they have never reached the present dangerous proportions.

The Secretary for Civil Service is Mr Lam Woon Kwong.

Mr Lam, naturally, follows orders as are handed down from on high: Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa is at the top of the pile.

Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa, naturally, follows orders as are handed down to him from on high: The head of the Government of the PRC -- probably as high as Mr Li Peng, the Prime Minister and The Chairman of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress.

Mr Lam has been instructed by Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa, directly or indirectly, to reform the Civil Service of the HKSAR.

This means, by innuendo, that the administration of the Government of Hongkong -- now known as the HKSAR -- left in place by the British, colonial administrators, is not considered acceptable for the 'new brooms' -- Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa et al et Beijing.

The suggestion, now, being made by various HKSAR civil-service staff members, including, but not limited to, Mr Stephen Wong Wai Hung, a spokesman for the staff side of the Disciplined Services Consultative Council, is that the HKSAR Government is making unilateral decisions without consulting labour.

Looking at this complaint in isolation, one is struck with the suggestive enormity of the allegation.

When the British ruled Hongkong, there was installed in the machinery of Government, the automatic requirement of Government-staff consultations on a regular basis.

It would appear that the British Administrators realised, quite a number of decades ago, that keeping labour informed of proposed additions, retrenchments, and/or changes within Government administration, or within a department of Government, coupled with comprehensive explanations for the reasons for the requirement for change, resulted in a relatively happy workforce ... and one which trusted Management, by and large.

This seemingly happy marriage, of Government and its staff, resulted in the Hongkong Government's Civil Service, maintaining that to work for the Hongkong Government meant that one ate with an iron rice bowl.

Now, there are suggestions that the iron rice bowl of Government has a deep fissure.

Many members on the staff side of the Civil Service are concerned.

The fear: There could be a general strike in the offing in the HKSAR.

If a call for a general strike should reverberate through the halls of the administration of Government, The Basic Law of the HKSAR allows for intervention by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The PLA could, at a moment's notice, bring in its tanks in the interests of maintaining the peace and tranquility in the HKSAR -- which, it could be held, was the duty of the Government of the PRC.

If this should come to pass, Beijing's Tiananmen Square 1989 may be revisited at Chater Garden, Central, the HKSAR.

If one were to try to ascribe blame for the present situation within the staff side of the Civil Service, the culprit, no doubt, would be Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa.

Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa could well be blamed for that which he ordered, as well as for that which he failed to do in keeping harmony within the staff side of the Civil Service.

The probable reason for this situation: Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa is a firm believer in Confucianism -- the family must be protected at all costs, with all members of the family, firmly maintaining the 8 principles of

Confucianism: Love; loyalty; filial piety; kindness, trustworthiness; brotherhood; harmony; and, peace.

As head of the HKSAR 'family', no doubt Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa maintains that his 'family' members, the staff of the Civil Service, should obey his orders -- or suffer his punishment.

Consciously, it is unlikely that Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa engineered the present, difficult situation within the staff side of the Civil Service, but his Confucian thinking, without question, would have coloured his determination when confronted with the possibility of a schism within his administrative staff.

Whether or not a general strike is called will make little difference in the short term for it is certain that the acidic taste of dissension will long stay in the mouths of quite a number of the staff of the Civil Service.

An implied threat, to call in the PLA troops, may well be a sufficient-enough fear, in the hearts of Civil Service staff members, not to call for a general strike.

But that will not make the HKSAR Civil Service efficient, for the next best thing to a general strike would be an unofficial work-to-rule call by the staff side.

This would not cripple the HKSAR Administration, immediately, as would a general strike, but it would not take long for the effects of such a move to be felt.

And there would be no HKSAR Government machinery to allow for the ordering in of the PLA troops since The Basic Law of the HKSAR does not proscribe legitimate complaints, being lodged in a legal fashion, and this would include a peaceful labour action, aimed at causing the HKSAR Government to send representatives to sit alongside members of the Government's staff side at the table of concessions and amelioration.

It is certain that people do not like to give up one mode of life to exchange it for that which is perceived to be another, less attractive mode, in the same way that a man who, normally, drives to his office, does not like to be forced to take public transport because of what he is told are changed financial circumstances.

He must think: Why do I have to give up driving to the office in my comfortable motor car?

If such a man has to give up his motor car, then a logical reason must be explained to him in order to persuade him that taking public transport may be considered the present norm.

He must be convinced of the reasonability of making the change, from driving to work to taking public transport.

In short, consultation and explanation, more often than not, results in amicable changes being implemented ... without ire.

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