

The 1949-50 strike

The reasons for the strike were intensely debated, both publicly and privately. Most people in Hong Kong seem to have believed that the strike was originally a pretty straightforward wage dispute — wages were already quite low in 1945, thanks to the disruption of wartime and occupation, and then fell much further behind when prices soared in the late 1940s. Most people sympathetic to the workers stressed these relatively apolitical issues.

People on the other side stressed the role of the Communist Party in encouraging the strike — especially the role of communist activists who had been sent from the mainland to work in Hong Kong. Communists were heavily involved in the Hong Kong Teachers' Welfare Association — a union organization based in the New Territories — and in the Education Advancement Society: a movement to establish new schools for workers' children (including one for the children of tramway workers) which was a collaboration of unions and other social activists (including the Anglican archbishop). The Society worked cooperatively with the government from its founding in 1946 through about the middle of 1948. But with the increased success of CCP forces on the mainland in their civil war with the Nationalists (1946-49) and the general intensification of Cold War tensions, suspicions that the CCP was also trying to subvert the government in Hong Kong grew. The arrival of Alexander Grantham, a staunch anti-communist, as the new governor of Hong Kong in 1948 coincided with a crackdown on pro-communist schools, curricula, and teachers: Grantham urged that even singing and drama clubs which performed pro-communist material should be shut down. London hesitated to give Grantham's government all the expanded powers that he asked for, but eventually did, and a number of schools were closed by the government for political reasons over the next few years. However, Grantham's moves to close the schools for workers' children in particular sparked a counter-movement to protect these schools, with considerable elite as well as labor support, and some of them survived.

Grantham was equally insistent that the labor movement was full of CCP influence that should be firmly resisted. When the tramway lockout and strike began in December, 1949, he insisted that the wage dispute was a mere pretext, and that the real purpose of this action was to disrupt essential public services, making Hong Kong vulnerable to a take-over from the mainland; he stuck to this point of view years later, when he published his memoirs. But British officials more generally were divided, with debate over the true nature of the strike reaching all the way up to the Cabinet in London, and also playing out daily in the Hong Kong press.

In retrospect, it is hard to doubt that the core of the dispute was the wage issue, rather than any political cause. But there were many CCP sympathizers in the labor movement, and they became increasingly important as the strike went on. Most workers were not being paid during the strike/lockout. Some also lost their eligibility for the subsidized rice rations that the government was providing to workers in key industries during this highly inflationary period — because, as the government's Commissioner of Labour explained, they were not working. With many workers thus desperate for help

with daily expenses, assistance from others became increasingly important (though the company did supply some rice to locked-out workers). Some help came from left-leaning groups within Hong Kong—both workers in other unions and better-off “progressives,” including many independent professionals. But there were also support campaigns organized in Guangdong that delivered food and other supplies to the Hong Kong strikers, and activists who came to assist their picketing and other activities. This, of course, further entrenched the belief among groups hostile to the strikers that they were – willingly or not – being used by the CCP for its political project.

In the last phase of the strike, the alignment of at least some of the workers with the CCP became more overt. Beijing made its first official public statement in support of the strikers on January 25 (roughly one month into the work stoppage). The next day, a South China Morning Post reporter announced that a large pro-union crowd (which he estimated at over 5,000), after successfully extracting a promise from the company that they would not hire a non-union job-seeker who had just left company headquarters, had celebrated by dancing the yangke, a North Chinese peasant song and dance that had been adapted by CCP propaganda troupes as a form of victory celebration. (Because this was not a dance form common in South China or Hong Kong, people who knew how to do it were presumed to have learned it from CCP-sponsored events.) The same reporter was then taken to visit the Tramway Workers’ Union headquarters, where he said he saw a large portrait of Mao Zedong on the wall and various other signs of pro-CCP sentiment. A few days later, after the January 30 clash between union supporters and police, a meeting of about 1,200 representatives of various Hong Kong unions decided not to call for a general strike, as some people had feared it would. But the meeting did ask the Federation of Trade Unions to formally request that Mao Zedong take (unspecified) action against the Hong Kong authorities and their “fascist” police tactics.

No action followed, and the strike ended on February 9-10. The increasingly radical tone of its last two weeks did, however, make it easier for the government to justify deporting 38 pro-union activists to the mainland, while the CCP quietly repatriated a number of its underground members from Hong Kong to the mainland. One of those repatriated was Li Xiaxiang, who had been head of the school for tramway workers’ children, and was married to a general in the Communist armed forces; she later headed various schools affiliated with the army in Heilongjiang.

關於 1949–1950 年罷工

罷工的原因在公開和私下都引發了激烈的爭論。大多數香港人似乎都認為，罷工最初只是一場簡單的勞資糾紛。

1945 年，受二戰和日佔的影響，工人工資本就非常低，然而在物價飛漲的 1940 年代，工資又進一步降低。大多數同情工人的人的側重點在於這些非政治性的問題。

另一方的側重點則在於共產黨在鼓勵罷工中所發揮的作用，尤其是大陸派到香港工作的共產黨積極分子的作用。

共產黨員加入了香港教師福利協會（總部設在新界的工會組織）和教育促進會：旨在聯合工會和社會運動人士

（包括英國聖公會大主教）為勞工子女（包括電車勞工子女）建立新學校。自 1946 年成立後至 1948 年年中，教育促進會便一直與政府合作。但隨著中共在大陸與國民黨的內戰中勝局在望，以及冷戰緊張局勢加劇，有關中共試圖顛覆港英政府的懷疑與日俱增。1948 年，堅定的反共人士葛量洪出任香港總督時，曾打壓親共學校、課程和教師：他甚至敦促關閉有親共資訊的唱歌和表演俱樂部。葛量洪政府要求擴大權力，倫敦方面猶豫不決，但最終還是答應了政府的要求。在接下來的幾年裡，許多學校因為政治原因被政府關閉。不過，葛量洪關閉勞工子弟學校時引發了一場保衛學校的抗議運動，得到了很多精英人士和勞工的支持，令到其中一些學校得以倖存。

葛量洪堅持認為，勞工運動深受中共影響，應堅決予以抵制。1949 年 12 月，電車停運和罷工開始時，他堅持認為勞資糾紛只是一個藉口，罷工的真正目的是擾亂基本公共服務，有利大陸接管香港；多年後，他在自己的回憶錄中依舊堅持這一觀點。但英國官員普遍持有不同觀點，關於罷工真實性質的爭論直達倫敦內閣，香港媒體每天也會對此進行報導。

回想起來，毫無疑問，這場爭議的核心是工資問題，而非政治原因。但勞工罷工運動中有很多中共支持者。隨著罷工的進行，這些人開始扮演越來越重要的角色。大多數工人在罷工/停工期間沒有拿到工資。部分人還失去獲得政府在高通脹時期為主要行業工人提供定額補貼薪水的資格。對此，政府勞工處處長解釋稱，這是因為他們沒有工作。因此，很多工人急需解決日常開支問題，他人的援助變得日益重要（儘管公司確實曾向停工的工人提供一些米糧）。香港的左翼群體、其他工會的工人、富裕的「進步人士」，包括很多獨立職業人士都紛紛施以援手。人們在廣東也組織了支援運動，旨在為香港罷工者以及前來協助糾察和組織其他活動的活動人士提供食物和其他物資。當然，此舉進一步加深了敵對組織的看法，他們認為無論自願與否，這些罷工者都被中共利用以實施他們的政治計劃。

在罷工最後階段，小部分工人開始公開與中共結盟。北京政府在 1 月 25 日（大約停工一個月後）首次發表官方聲明，公開支持罷工者。次日，根據《南華早報》一名記者的報導，大批工會支持者（據他估計有 5000 多人）在成功獲得公司承諾（不會雇用剛離開總部公司的非工會求職者）後，現場表現扭秧歌（中共宣傳部改編的一種慶祝勝利的北方農民歌舞）進行慶祝。（這種舞蹈在華南地區或香港並不常見，所以會跳這種舞蹈的人被認為是從中共活動中學會的。）隨後，該記者到電車工會總部參觀，他表示在那裡看到牆上有毛澤東大幅畫像以及其他各種親共跡象。幾天後，在工會支持者於 1 月 30 日與警方發生衝突後，香港各工會約 1200 名代表召開會議，決定不

再鼓動令人擔心的大規模罷工，但要求工會聯合會正式請求毛澤東對香港當局及其「法西斯」員警策略採取行動（未具體說明）。

然而，事實上並無任何後續行動，罷工於 2 月 9 日至 10 日結束。過去兩週內越來越激進的情況讓港英政府更易做下將 38 名工會支持者驅逐到大陸的決定，與此同時，中共也悄悄將一些地下黨員從香港送回大陸。李夏湘便是其中一員，她曾是電車勞工子弟學校的校長，也是一名共產黨軍隊將領的妻子；她後來在黑龍江的多所軍隊附屬學校擔任校長。