

# Protests in Hong Kong continue after riot police withdraw

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Tens of thousands of protesters remained on the streets of Hong Kong last night and are expected to renew their demonstrations today. On Sunday and early Monday morning, large numbers of riot police attempted to disperse pro-democracy protests with tear gas, pepper spray, and baton attacks. However, the attacks on peaceful protesters, far from breaking up the crowds, only provoked broader anger and prompted others to join in.

Throughout Monday, protests spread to three areas in the city: Admiralty, where the central government buildings are located, the Causeway Bay shopping district, and Mong Kok in Kowloon. In a bid to prevent the protests from spiraling out of control, the Hong Kong administration withdrew the riot police and issued appeals for calm.

Some of the protest groups joined government officials in attempting to convince those in the streets to return home. Leaders of Occupy Central, which championed a civil disobedience campaign, called for an end to the demonstrations. Among them, Cardinal Joseph Zen pleaded: “Please go home, don’t sacrifice your lives.” Rumours that Beijing might send the army to put down the protests have been circulating, but for the moment the central Chinese government is continuing to support its officials in Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), one of the largest labour groups in the city, called for a strike today, in response to a boycott of classes announced by the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union. HKCTU head Lee Cheuk-yan is chairman of the Labour Party, one of the fractions of the opposition grouping known as the pan-Democrats. The call for a one-day strike is aimed at containing and controlling the protest movement and confining it to the narrow demands of the pan-Democrats.

The protests began last week when university students launched a weeklong boycott of classes. Outraged by Beijing’s plans for the next election for Hong Kong’s chief executive, student organisations held demonstrations throughout the week, including a sit-in outside a government building complex on Friday. After arrests were made, the protests swelled by Saturday night to an estimated 50,000.

Last month, Beijing agreed to allow the direct election of Hong Kong’s chief executive in 2017, but only two or three candidates vetted by a pro-Beijing nomination committee would be allowed to stand. The plan must still pass the Legislative Council, where it could be vetoed by the pan-Democrat bloc. In that event, however, the current system of selecting the chief executive by a committee stacked with supporters of China’s central government would remain in place.

While Beijing’s announcement sparked the protests, those taking part are animated by broader aspirations than simply the demands for an open election for chief executive or the resignation of the incumbent Leung Chun-ying. As well as fears that Beijing’s autocratic regime will extend its police-state measures from the mainland to Hong Kong, there are sharpening social tensions produced by the growing social gulf between rich and poor.

Hong Kong has one of the highest per capita rates of billionaires in the world—39 out of a population of 7 million—while about 20 percent of working people live below the poverty line. Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient, a measure of social inequality, increased from 0.525 a decade ago to 0.537 in 2011—the highest level since records began in 1971.

None of the social concerns finds expression in the demands formulated by Occupy Central leaders and the pan-Democrats, who represent layers of the Hong Kong

corporate elite who fear their business interests will be compromised by a tightening of Beijing's control over the former British colony. Hong Kong became a Special Administration Region of China in 1997 governed by its own Basic Law, under the formula of "one country, two systems."

While the protests, particularly by students and young people, have shown a degree of exuberance and determination, they are also dominated by political confusion and naivety that can be exploited by the United States and British governments for their own political purposes.

The Chinese government is certainly concerned not only that US imperialism will use the protests to weaken Beijing's grip over Hong Kong, but also to encourage social unrest in China itself. While not naming either Britain or the US, China's foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying stated: "We firmly oppose external forces supporting illegal activities, such as the Occupy Central movement."

A commentary on the official *People's Daily* website yesterday was far more explicit. It denounced pro-democracy leaders who sought support from "anti-China forces" in Britain and the US and branded them as "a gang of people whose hearts belong to colonial rule and who are besotted with 'Western democracy'."

There is no doubt that both the US and Britain are calculating how to exploit the situation. As part of its "pivot to Asia," the Obama administration is actively engaged in diplomatic intrigues and machinations, as well as a military build-up, against China throughout the region. Many of the pan-Democrats and Occupy Central leaders also have a pro-Western orientation, as well as links to the US and Britain.

Martin Lee, one of the founders of the Democrat Party in 1994, traveled to Britain to rally support from the former colonial ruler shortly after Beijing released its White Paper foreshadowing its August 31 decision to limit future elections. Meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, Lee chastised Britain for not doing more to assist the pan-Democrats. "Unfortunately the British government did not condemn it at all," Lee said. "On the contrary your prime minister received the Chinese premier to sign billions of dollars worth of deals. There was not a word of criticism."

However, the protests that have erupted over the past

week do not resemble the "colour revolutions" in the various former Soviet Republics, backed, financed and in some cases engineered via many US front organisations. The danger facing young people and workers taking part in the current Hong Kong demonstrations is that without a clear political perspective these protests can be exploited by the US for its own ends.

It is certainly necessary to oppose the police-state regime in Beijing, which represents the interests of a small clique of ultra-wealthy oligarchs. At the same time, however, it is essential to oppose US imperialism and its allies, which have used the banner of "human rights" and "democracy" time and again to advance their predatory interests. In Hong Kong and China, as well as in every country, including the United States itself, the struggle for genuine democratic rights is bound up with the fight to build a unified movement of the working class on the basis of socialist internationalism.



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