

Hong Kong chief executive seeks to defuse protests

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In an effort to end days of mass protests, Hong Kong's chief executive Leung Chun-ying held a press conference late last night to announce that he had delegated his deputy, chief secretary Carrie Lam, to meet with student leaders. A student boycott of classes last week led to clashes with police and sparked demonstrations that have drawn in tens of thousands of people, mainly young, since the weekend.

The main protest organisations—Occupy Central, the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Scholarism—yesterday set midnight as the deadline for Leung to resign or face an escalation of their action, including the occupation of government buildings. Speaking at 11.30 p.m., Leung emphatically refused to step down, but offered talks with Lam over their demands for less restrictive framework for the 2017 election of chief executive.

The immediate trigger for the protests was the August announcement by China's National People's Congress that, while allowing universal suffrage for the first time, candidates for chief executive would be chosen by a nomination committee stacked with pro-Beijing loyalists. The requirement that each candidate have the support of 50 percent of the committee virtually ensured that Beijing could screen out opposition politicians.

Leung's offer of talks "as soon as possible" was accompanied by the threat to use police repression to block any attempt to occupy government buildings. He also insisted that any dialogue be within the framework of the Basic Law—the legal framework governing the British handover of its former colony to China in 1997—and the National People's Congress. The restriction effectively rules out any discussion of student demands to allow the civil nomination of candidates, in other words by ordinary citizens.

Leung had Beijing's backing. A frontpage commentary yesterday in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) *People's Daily* declared that the "central fully trusts Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying and is very satisfied with his work." It added that it firmly supported the Hong Kong police in handling "illegal activities" and preventing "chaos" that would damage the territory's economy.

Leung's proposal is a transparent attempt to buy time and defuse the protests after crowds swelled to over 100,000 during the past two days of vacation. In seeking to end the protests, he had the support of sections of the official opposition—the so-called pan-Democrat grouping of parties and organisations.

The *South China Morning Post* reported that four pan-Democrat legislators—Civil Party leader Alan Leong, Labour Party representative Cyd Ho Sau-Lan, and Democratic Party chairwoman Emily Lau and Charles Mok—met with chief secretary Lam at 5 p.m. and urged her to meet with student leaders as soon as possible to halt the crisis.

The pan-Democrats represent the interests of layers of the corporate elite and upper middle classes who are concerned that Beijing's control over Hong Kong's administration will undermine its position as China's premier financial centre. Under the formula "one country, two systems," Beijing allowed Hong Kong to retain the British legal system that guarantees private property rights and makes it an attractive base of operations for investment into and out of China.

From the outset, the pan-Democrats sought to use the wider popular resentment and fears over Beijing's autocratic methods of rule to pressure it for concessions that would allow them to stand a candidate. They have the numbers in the Legislative Council to veto Beijing's proposal for the 2017 elections, in which case

the current anti-democratic system of selection the chief executive by a hand-picked committee would remain in place.

Like Beijing and the Hong Kong administration, the pan-Democrats are deeply fearful that the longer the protests continue, the greater the likelihood that sections of the working class will be drawn in. Despite the fact that the pan-Democrats, Occupy Central and the student organisations have raised no social demands, the protests have been fuelled by deepening social tensions. Over the past two decades, Hong Kong has become one of the most socially polarised cities in the world—dominated by a tiny stratum of multi-billionaires while an estimated 20 percent of the population lives below an austere official poverty line with virtually no welfare support.

The outlook of the pan-Democrats was revealed in remarks yesterday by former Democratic Party leader Albert Ho. While posturing before the media, saying he was willing to “take a bullet” if police turned on the protests, Ho made clear that he feared escalating social unrest and wanted an end to the protests. “We have to achieve something that will enable the crowd to claim victory,” he told the *New York Times*. “They must retreat with dignity, but that may not necessarily be complete victory.”

That “something” came in the form of Leung’s vague offer of talks. Despite expressing reservations, all three protests organisations welcomed the announcement. The Hong Kong Federation of Students had already signalled its willingness to negotiate in an open letter to the chief executive that dropped its previous demand for his resignation. Occupy Central had made clear all along that it would call off protests, if they threatened to get “out of control.” Joshua Wong, the 17-year-old leader of Scholarism, formed two years ago during a protest campaign against plans to impose a “patriotic” syllabus in schools, called for talks as soon as possible.

Leung’s announcement was greeted with deep suspicion and booing by layers of protesters. As reported by the *South China Morning Post*, Elvis Ko, a student, declared that the offer was “meaningless,” adding: “We should fight for true democracy first. Without it, even if Leung steps down, there would just be another Leung elected.” Another protester, Olga Chung, said: “They haven’t scheduled a meeting, they

said they will meet but not when. Who knows, they may set it up for a month or two months from now. It’s all rubbish.”

It is not yet clear to what extent the protests will continue. The student leaders have not called them off. What has been exposed, however, is the limited character of their demands and the political confusion dominating the largely middle class demonstrations. The broad frustrations, especially among young people, over their deteriorating living standards, poor job prospects and Beijing’s autocratic methods have been channelled into the call for open elections. Even if that demand were fully realised, the outcome would be an election between candidates representing rival factions of Hong Kong’s super-rich determined to impose new burdens on working people as the territory is buffeted by slowing growth in China and increasing global economic uncertainty.

The student organisations have proven incapable of making any appeal to the working class in Hong Kong, let alone in China, without which it is impossible to mount any sustained challenge for basic democratic and social rights against the Stalinist bureaucratic apparatus in Beijing and its representatives in Hong Kong. Moreover, the pro-Western orientation and ties of many of the “democratic” opposition parties and groups leaves the protest movement open to manipulation by US imperialism and its allies as part of its “pivot to Asia” aimed at undermining and militarily encircling China.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the proposed talks, if they take place, the protests will be derailed if they remain under the current leadership and limited to the narrow perspective of an election to decide which group of wealthy oligarchs will politically dominate Hong Kong.



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