Hong Kong government issues ultimatum to protesters

Peter Symonds
6 October 2014

After a week-long blockade of government offices by tens of thousands of protesters, Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying delivered an ultimatum over the weekend to provide access as of today, warning that the police would take "all actions necessary" to that end. The protests have narrowly focussed on the demand for a full and open election for the post of chief executive in 2017.

While refusing to call off the protests, the three organisations that have dominated the demonstrations—Occupy Central, the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Scholarism—announced yesterday that government employees would be able to go to work. Student leaders have also begun to enter talks with the Hong Kong administration.

Leung agreed to discussions late last Thursday involving his deputy, Chief Secretary Carrie Lam, as a deadline set by protest leaders approached for his resignation. He refused to step down and insisted that any dialogue take place within the parameters of the Basic Law—the legal framework governing the British handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997—and the decisions of China's National People's Congress.

In late August, the National People's Congress announced that the 2017 election for chief executive would permit universal suffrage, but placed tight restrictions on nominations, virtually ensuring that all candidates would be pro-Beijing. The protest organisations, along with the official opposition pan-democrats, have demanded an easing or removal of vetting by a nomination committee.

By accepting talks on Leung's terms, the protest organisations signalled their willingness to cut a deal that falls well short of their own limited demands. The situation, however, remains volatile.

The predominantly young, middle class protesters regard an open election for chief executive in 2017 as an opportunity to have a say about their future. Under conditions of a slowing economy, worsening job opportunities and a deepening social divide, their economic prospects are looking increasingly bleak. Their illusions in elections, which would inevitably be dominated by the corporate elite, are only fed by the fact that the Hong Kong administration has never been democratically elected, either under Britain or China.

After the announcement of talks, numbers dwindled on Friday, only to surge back on the streets over the weekend after the protest sites at Mong Kok and Causeway Bay came under attack from thugs, allegedly linked to Triad criminal gangs. The pro-Beijing media and organisations such as the Alliance for Peace and Democracy have sought to whip up anti-protest mobs by exploiting growing public frustration over the disruption caused to jobs, businesses and daily life. In response, protests on Saturday at the main site, outside the central government offices at Admiralty grew into the tens of thousands.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the leaders of the student organisations and Occupy Central were holed up in meetings for most of Sunday trying to decide whether to call off or continue the protests. Late Sunday evening, the HKFS held talks with government officials—including Lau Kong-wah, undersecretary of the constitutional and mainland affairs bureau and Ronald Cha, political assistant to the secretary for constitutional and mainland affairs—to lay the basis for a meeting with Chief Secretary Lam.

HKSF secretary general Alex Chow told the media that his organisation would not back down. He insisted that "a dialogue is not a compromise." Chow indicated, however, that he was looking for a deal, declaring that

© World Socialist Web Site

“we understand that there are people in both the government and here who want to solve society’s problems.”

Voices from the pan-democratic opposition also joined the Hong Kong administration and pro-Beijing organisations in calling for an end to the protests. Civic Party legislator Ronny Tong pleaded for students to leave the streets. Democratic Party politician Law Chi-kwong called on the public not to go to Admiralty, warning if they did, they had to be prepared for government action.

While nominally backing the protests, the pan-democrats, like the Chinese government and its Hong Kong representatives, have been fearful from the outset that the demonstrations could spiral out of control. The official opposition represents layers of the business elites, concerned that their interests and Hong Kong’s position as China’s prime financial hub are under threat from Beijing’s encroachment on the territory’s legal and political system. As the debate over the 2017 election emerged this year, the pan-democrats made clear they were willing to reach a deal with Beijing, as long as they could nominate one of their number as a candidate.

While Occupy Central and the student organisations have been less compromising and more militant in their actions, their political outlook is broadly in line with the pan-democrats and reflects the same class interests. As a result, broader social concerns over deteriorating living standards and the democratic aspirations of working people, in the one of the most socially polarised cities in the world, find no expression in the protest demands.

The Chinese government has been terrified that the Hong Kong protests could spread to the Chinese mainland and be used by the US and its allies as part of Washington’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at undermining and militarily encircling China. The official *People’s Daily* issued another front-page commentary on Saturday against the protests, declaring: “For the minority of people who want to foment a ‘colour revolution’ on the mainland by way of Hong Kong, this is but a daydream.”

The pro-Western orientation and ties of the Hong Kong opposition opens the protests to manipulation by imperialism. However, the Obama administration, embroiled in an escalating war in the Middle East, has taken a low-key attitude to the situation in Hong Kong. While calling on Beijing for restraint in dealing with the demonstrations, the US has at this stage not directly backed the protest demands.

In a statement yesterday, the HKFS signalled it had no intention of making any fundamental challenge to the status quo in Hong Kong or China. It declared that the protest movement was “absolutely not a revolution.” The student leaders clearly had difficulties in justifying their decision to enter talks with Chief Secretary Lam and ease the blockade of government offices. As reported in the *New York Times*, the HKFS said it was “hard to persuade protesters to leave when there hasn’t been any progress on their demands over political reform.”

Nevertheless, the back downs by student leaders and their acceptance of vague talks with the government, together with repeated threats of police violence, have taken their toll. Confusion and division among protesters over what to do were evident in comments to the media. While some demonstrators were adamant they would stay put, others were clearly despondent. As of this morning, the *South China Morning Post* reported that the number of participants was a few hundred at each of the three main sites.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site