

Hong Kong protest leadership divided after police clashes

Peter Symonds
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In the wake of violent clashes between protesters and police on late Sunday night and Monday, the three founders of Occupy Central announced yesterday that they would hand themselves into police. They called for an end to the two months of protests. The two student organisations involved in the protests rejected the appeal.

Occupy Central, along with Scholarism and the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), have dominated the protest movement that erupted in September against the Chinese government's plans for the 2017 election for the city's chief executive. In late August, Beijing's National People's Congress announced that it would allow universal suffrage in the election, but only for candidates vetted by a nomination committee.

From the outset, Occupy Central trailed behind the student organisations, only joining the protests after a student strike and a violent police crackdown swelled the rallies to tens of thousands. Occupy Central leaders declared that they were committed to pacifist civil disobedience and pledged to call a halt to protests if they threatened to get out of hand.

Occupy Central leader Benny Tai, a university professor, told the media yesterday: "As we prepare to surrender, we three urge the students to retreat, to put down deep roots in the community and transform the movement." Earlier in the day, Tai and his two Occupy Central co-founders issued a statement, saying: "To surrender is not to fail, it is a silent demonstration against a heartless government."

The clashes with the police took place after student leaders called on protesters to escalate their action and surround government buildings in central Hong Kong. Riot police counter-attacked, using baton charges, pepper spray and water hoses to break up the demonstrators and drive them back. At least 40

protesters were arrested and 58 people, including some police officers, were injured in the confrontation, which lasted into the early hours of Monday.

Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying declared on Monday that the situation had become "intolerable" and must end. "From now on," he warned, "the police will take enforcement action resolutely." On the same day, a Hong Kong court granted an injunction that sets the stage for police to move to clear the remaining protest encampments.

Early last week, the police used a court injunction to oust the protest site at Mong Kok. Thousands of police were involved in the operation, which resulted in at least 148 arrests. Clashes continued over subsequent days after demonstrators attempted to re-occupy streets in the area.

Speaking on Monday, HKFS leader Alex Chow acknowledged that the attempt to surround the government headquarters had failed and said he would consult with others in the so-called pro-democracy movement. Scholarism leader Joshua Wong announced that he and two others would begin a hunger strike until the Hong Kong government agreed to negotiations with the protest leaders.

Previous talks have ended with no sign of any concessions on the part of government leaders in Hong Kong or Beijing. Hong Kong has functioned as a special administrative region of China, with a degree of political and legal autonomy, since Britain relinquished its former colony in 1997.

The student leaders are under pressure from the pan-democrat grouping of parties—the official opposition in the city's legislative council—to end the protests. On Monday, 23 of the 27 pan-democratic lawmakers issued a joint statement condemning police brutality, but also urging no further escalation of the protest campaign.

Democratic Party lawmaker Albert Ho called on students to “reflect deeply” on Sunday’s clashes, declaring that further escalation would be “meaningless and would only trigger more injuries.” Labour Party leader Lee Cheuk-yan said: “It’s time to figure out a strategy—other than escalation—to sustain the long-term fight.”

The pan-democrats represent sections of the Hong Kong ruling elite who are concerned that Beijing’s political control over the city’s administration could undermine their business interests and Hong Kong’s position as an Asian financial centre. From the outset, they have been willing to compromise with the Chinese government over the framework for the 2017 election.

While the student leaders have taken a more uncompromising and militant stance, their political outlook reflects the same class interests. They have made no appeal to the working class, either in Hong Kong, which is one of the most socially polarised cities in the world, or in China. Their limited demands for changes to the electoral system in Hong Kong, even if enacted in full, would result in a government committed to defending big business and the financial elite at the expense of working people.

The Obama administration, while calling on Beijing to exercise restraint, has publicly kept its distance from the protests in Hong Kong. Within the US Congress, however, pressure is growing for the US to take advantage of the turmoil to undermine China’s political influence in the territory. The issue is to be discussed this week in both the Senate and House congressional subcommittees on Asia and the Pacific.

The House committee was meeting yesterday to “examine the impact of China’s actions for US-Hong Kong policy, the future of democracy in Hong Kong, and how the [US] administration can better support democratic reform efforts.” Both houses of Congress are currently considering legislation to alter the 1992 Hong Kong Policy Act to force the White House to certify the territory’s autonomous status before future agreements with Hong Kong.

Washington’s cynical exploitation of the “human rights” banner always seeks to further US economic and strategic interests through diplomatic intrigue, political provocation or outright war. A more aggressive US intervention into Hong Kong politics would be aimed at establishing a base of operations, as

part of its broader “pivot to Asia,” to destabilise and undermine the Chinese regime.



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