

Hong Kong police shut down protests

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Thousands of Hong Kong police moved in yesterday to dismantle the main protest site at Admiralty which has been the focus of 11 weeks of demonstrations against Beijing's plans for the 2017 election for the territory's chief executive. Police dismantled barricades, tents, posters and other structures that were part of the protest encampment on a section of a major highway near the city's government offices.

Most protesters left the area when ordered to do so, while others were dragged off by police. At a press conference yesterday evening, a police spokesman said that 209 people had been arrested at the site and four more away from the encampment. Identity card details were taken from another 909 people as they left the area and they could face charges in the future.

A second protest site at Mong Kok was cleared last month amid violent clashes between police and demonstrators. While a third smaller site continues at Causeway Bay, yesterday's police operation effectively marks the end of the protests.

Among those arrested were leaders of the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism that sparked the protests with a student strike in September. When the police attempted to clear the protesters near government headquarters at Admiralty using tear gas, the street demonstrations swelled into tens of thousands as people expressed their opposition to the police violence. The leaders of Occupy Central, the other main protest organisation, had handed themselves over to police in early December and called for an end to the protests.

Also arrested were prominent members of the official Hong Kong opposition—the so-called pan-democrat grouping—which from the outset attempted to rein in the protests. These included Democratic Party politicians Martin Lee, Albert Ho and Emily Lau, Labour Party chairman Lee Cheuk-yan, Civic Party leader Alan Leong. Their decision to court arrest was a cynical

attempt to retain a degree of legitimacy among the layers of young people who have been involved in the protests over the past two months.

The pan-democrats represent a faction of Hong Kong's ruling elite which seeks greater autonomy for the former British colony which was handed back to China in 1997. Their fear is that Beijing's involvement in Hong Kong political and economic life will compromise their own business interests and undermine the city's position as the major financial centre for investment into and from China.

The protests erupted over Beijing's decision in late August to allow universal suffrage, for the first time, for the 2017 election for chief executive, but with the proviso that candidates be selected by a nomination committee. While the pan-democrats were prepared to compromise, the student organisations demanded that the election be open to directly nominated candidates—an option that Beijing and the current chief executive Leung Chun-ying have flatly rejected.

When the mass protests emerged, the chief concern of the pan-democrats was to prevent them from triggering broader social unrest. The student leaders, while more uncompromising in their stance, shared that same class outlook. They confined their demands narrowly to the call for direct nomination and made no appeal to the widespread discontent among young people and more broadly in the working class over unemployment, social inequality and the lack of housing and job opportunities.

Hong Kong is one of the most socially polarised cities in the world. Its economy is dominated by a handful of multi-billionaires while 20 percent of the population live below an austere poverty line with virtually no welfare support. Real wages have declined as the cost of living, especially housing costs, has risen sharply. The waiting time for public housing has grown to 10 years forcing many into makeshift

accommodation, including what are known as “cage homes.”

At a high point of the protests on October 2, the student leaders ditched their demand for Leung’s resignation and ended their blockade of government headquarters, in return for talks with Leung’s deputy Carrie Lam that ended in stalemate. Since then, while the protests have ebbed and flowed, the Hong Kong government has played a waiting game, capitalising on mounting public disgruntlement and anger with the protests’ disruption of the city’s economic life and their lack of any broader appeal.

While the Obama administration took a relatively low-key approach to the Hong Kong protests, calling for “restraint” from Beijing and local authorities, it was clearly watching the situation closely. In his speech during the G20 summit last month in Brisbane, Obama made a reference to the people of Hong Kong “speaking out for their universal rights.” The remark was a pointed hint that the US could in the future exploit the issue of “human rights” in Hong Kong to erode Beijing influence.

The US, as well as Britain as the former colonial ruler, has longstanding links with sections of the pan-democrat opposition in Hong Kong. Prominent among those arrested yesterday was media tycoon Jimmy Lai, an outspoken critic of Beijing. Earlier this year, leaked emails between Lai and his top aide Mark Simon revealed that he had supplied funds to several pan-democrats as well as the Occupy Central movement. Simon, a former US naval intelligence analyst, had been head of the Hong Kong branch of Republicans Abroad.

The protest broke up yesterday amid chants of “We will be back.” But the narrow aim of the protest leaders—a modified framework for the 2017 election—leaves such movements open to exploitation by sections of the Hong Kong ruling elite and by the US and its “human rights” imperialism. Even if a more open election were held, the outcome would be an administration that ruled on behalf of the city’s financial oligarchy at the expense of working people.

Any genuine struggle for democratic and social rights involves a turn to the working class in Hong Kong as well as throughout China in a political struggle based on a socialist perspective against all factions of the ruling class.



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