

Police crackdown against Hong Kong protesters opposing extradition bill

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Tens of thousands of people protested in Hong Kong Wednesday against a bill, backed by Beijing, that would allow extraditions to any country, including mainland China. Debate on the legislation, which was slated to take place, was postponed. The demonstration took place three days after more than one million people marched Sunday against the bill.

Wednesday's demonstrators, largely youth and students, blocked streets surrounding Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo). The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions also called a strike for the day. With lawmakers unable to enter the building, the government announced that debate would resume at a "later time to be determined." Andrew Leung, LegCo chairman, said Tuesday that the vote would take place on June 20.

To protect themselves against teargas, protesters carried umbrellas, reminiscent of the so-called Occupy or Umbrella Movement in 2014. Those protests led to the protracted occupation of key sections of the city as people demanded the right to directly elect the chief executive, the head of Hong Kong. Currently Beijing effectively appoints the top official.

This week's protests represent a sharp condemnation of both the Hong Kong and Beijing governments, with youth rightly concerned that the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party is preparing further measures to restrict democratic rights in the city.

Jeremy Lau, a 26-year-old bank worker, criticized Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam, and the government's dismissal of the concerns of broad layers, telling the *South China Morning Post*: "More than a million people have taken to the streets and she still considers our demands trash. Isn't she, as the leader of Hong Kong, supposed to take citizens' interests into consideration?"

The Beijing regime fears the spread of social discontent and demonstrations from Hong Kong to the mainland, which also motivates its desire to have the extradition bill passed. The CCP wants to be able to silence and intimidate individuals and organizations on its doorstep in Hong Kong that are critical of its police-state methods on the Chinese mainland.

The Hong Kong police responded to yesterday's protests with violence, using water cannons and pepper spray before firing tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd, injuring at least 22. Witnesses stated that officers targeted journalists. Lam denounced protesters for holding an "organized riot."

Police Commissioner Stephen Lo threatened demonstrators, saying: "If they are peaceful protesters, please leave. If they are violent protesters, then please think twice because you might regret your decision for your entire life." In other words, the mere act of protesting is considered violent and subject to repression.

As pro-Beijing lawmakers control the LegCo, passage of the bill is assured under current conditions. The opposition grouping known as the pan-democrats offers no genuine opposition. Instead, it attempts to win concessions to smooth over the concerns of business interests wary of the city growing too close to Beijing. Claudia Mo, a member of the pan-democrats, attempted to give these opposition parties a radical veneer, telling protesters Wednesday: "During Occupy Central 2014, we had said, 'We will be back.' Today, we say, 'We are back.'"

None of the issues has been resolved since 2014; they have only intensified. An Oxfam report last September revealed economic inequality is at its worst levels in 45 years. The top 10 percent in the city takes home 43.9 times the amount of the bottom 10 percent. Billions in

stock dividends go untaxed in the name of a “free economy.” The minimum wage of \$HK34.50 (\$US4.41) an hour has less purchasing power than it did eight years ago. It stands well below the living wage of \$HK54.70. One in four children and one in three elderly live in poverty.

Where, then, have Hong Kong’s democrats been since 2014? The pan-democrats’ purpose is to corral social discontent by leading workers and students into political dead ends. No major gains or reforms were won in 2014. No movement uniting the oppressed in Hong Kong was launched. One university student, Sean, told CNN: “We don’t have any leaders this time. This is our last hope.” That students and workers do not see the pan-democrats as leaders is an indictment of these politicians’ failure to address their real concerns.

Under conditions of growing inequality around the globe, genuine democracy is impossible as countries compete to slash workers’ jobs and wages for greater profits. Governments can respond only with the sort of repression on display in Hong Kong yesterday.

Hong Kong workers and youth therefore will find in the mainland Chinese working class powerful allies in their fight for democratic rights. They must turn to these allies and the working class around the globe.

Instead, politicians like Mo spread the poison of Hong Kong parochialism to isolate workers and defeat their struggles. She is the founder of Hong Kong First, a political party within the pan-democrats that claims Hong Kong’s “culture and lifestyle” must be defended from an “invasion” by mainland Chinese people, including tourists and children attending schools.

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Other politicians like Martin Lee make open appeals to United States imperialism. Lee, whose involvement in Hong Kong politics goes back decades, met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in May. The US State Department released a statement at the time saying Pompeo was concerned over the extradition bill as it threatens the “rule of law.” Washington and its allies regularly accuse Beijing of violating the “rule of law” in the South China Sea, as they invent pretexts to bring military and economic pressure on China.

State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus pointed to Washington’s real concerns on Monday. After making empty references to “democratic values,”

she stressed: “We are also concerned that the (extradition) amendments could damage Hong Kong’s business environment, and subject our citizens residing in or visiting Hong Kong to China’s capricious judicial system.”

A letter to Chief Executive Lam from the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China in May made clear Washington’s hypocrisy on democratic rights. The commission is headed by Representative James McGovern and Senator Marco Rubio. They declared that the new legislation could be used by Beijing to target “business persons, journalists, rights advocates and political activists residing in Hong Kong.”

What hypocrisy! One has only to look at the US-led efforts to extradite journalist Julian Assange to the United States, to face retribution for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, to see what Washington really thinks about journalists, activists and democratic rights.

Workers and young people should oppose the oppressive legislation and repressive police methods against unarmed protesters by Hong Kong authorities, acting on behalf of Beijing. At the same time, however, they should reject with contempt the efforts of the pan-democrats to seek the support of US imperialism, which is notorious for exploiting “human rights” to further its own predatory interests.

The fight for the political independence of the working class means, above all, the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International to lead the fight to unite all Chinese workers as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.



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