

Further Hong Kong protests planned against extradition law

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Hong Kong's top official, Chief Executive Carrie Lam, faces a deadline of today to abandon a planned extradition law that has sparked huge protests on the past two Sundays. The widespread opposition reflects deep fears that the bill, which will allow extradition proceedings to mainland China, will enable Beijing to seize political dissidents.

Up to two million people, more than a quarter of Hong Kong's population, took to the streets last Sunday despite an announcement by Lam the previous day that the legislation would be suspended indefinitely. The protest was a huge political blow to Lam's credibility. Clearly no-one believed her assurances.

After an extraordinary meeting of the city's Executive Council on Monday, Lam acknowledged to a televised news conference on Tuesday that the legislation had triggered conflict and dissatisfaction with her government. "I personally have to shoulder much of the responsibility," she said. "For this, I offer my most sincerely apologies to all people of Hong Kong."

Many people have already dismissed the apology, noting that the chief executive had not addressed the two main demands of protesters on Sunday: to withdraw the bill and for her to resign. "We are very disappointed and angry," Bonnie Leung, vice-convenor of the Civil Human Rights Front, told the *Guardian*. "We do not accept Carrie Lam's so-called apology."

A 35-year-old woman, surnamed Ho, told the *Coconuts Hong Kong* website, she had stayed overnight last Wednesday to "protect the students," after violent clashes during the day between the police and young protesters. Asked whether she accepted Lam's apology, Ho replied: "Absolutely not!" Speaking of her son, she added: "I don't want him to grow up in a world where

he says something online and that could get him arrested and extradited."

The *Guardian* reported that a message circulating on social media was calling for people to gather outside the government headquarters to "escalate their actions" if the Hong Kong government failed to meet the protest demands by 5 p.m. today. It called for workers to strike, students not to attend school, and shops to close. As of yesterday, the message on one popular social media platform alone had received nearly 93,000 "likes."

The mass protests, just across from huge concentrations of industrial workers in southern China, have triggered alarm bells in Beijing. While the Chinese regime has supported the legislation and stood by Lam—for the present—it has sought to distance itself from any responsibility for the legislation. Lam reportedly consulted with top Chinese officials before announcing the suspension of the bill on Saturday.

In an unusual statement, China's ambassador to Britain Liu Xiaoming told the BBC that the legislation was entirely Lam's doing. "The central government gave no instruction, no order, about the making [of the legal] amendment. This amendment was initiated by the Hong Kong government."

The statement is simply not credible. Lam, despite her attempts to appear independent, holds her post only as long as she does Beijing's bidding. The chief executive is effectively chosen by a committee hand-picked by the Chinese bureaucracy. In an effort to intimidate opponents, several pro-democracy legislators have been disqualified and leaders of the protracted 2014 "Occupy" or "Umbrella" protests have been convicted and imprisoned.

Top Chinese officials were undoubtedly involved in Lam's efforts to push through the extradition

legislation. Amid sharpening social tensions throughout the mainland, Beijing is cracking down on protests and strikes. It is deeply concerned that dissidents and critics in Hong Kong will spark unrest across the border and views the extradition law as a means to silence its opponents.

Above all, the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party regime is horrified that the mass protests in Hong Kong could spiral out of the control and encourage a rebellion on the mainland. While the Hong Kong protests have been limited to basic democratic demands by the city's official opposition, their very scope signifies the involvement of significant layers of workers, who are also being driven by social crisis they confront. Hong Kong is one of the most socially unequal cities in the world, with widespread poverty and virtually no social safety net.

The protests also threaten turmoil in the major international financial centre, on which Beijing is heavily dependent. At least 60 percent of foreign direct investment into China flows through Hong Kong. Many corporations, including Chinese, use the territory as a base for their operations in China. The "one country, two systems" formula, which was the basis for Britain's 1997 handover of its colony to China, offers legal protections for investors.

The protests are not only a blow to Lam, but also to Chinese President Xi Jinping who is already facing inner party criticism over the mounting economic and strategic confrontation with the United States. A commentary in the British-based *Financial Times* on Wednesday, entitled "How Hong Kong defied Xi Jinping," noted:

"Even though his proxy in the territory, Ms Lam, has accepted responsibility for the debacle, it is a stunning setback for a man regarded as China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong. Chinese officials publicly backed Ms Lam's proposed changes to the extradition bill—even though they later said it was her idea—after they were introduced in February. This put Beijing's credibility on the line as the crisis escalated."

There will be divisions in Beijing as to how to proceed in Hong Kong. While top leaders have pushed Lam to back off on the legislation, at least temporarily, hardliners will be pushing for tougher measures against the opposition.

The *Financial Times* cited the comments of Major

General Xu Yan last November. He denounced Hong Kong as a hot bed of "people [who] hate the Communist Party with every fibre of their beings." He continued: "Now is the time for us to act. A big problem for us in the past is that we emphasised 'two systems' too much. We didn't emphasise 'one country'." Xu applauded the Hong Kong government for prosecuting the leaders of the 2014 Occupy protests.

On Monday, Hong Kong's police chief Stephen Lo defended his use of the term "riot" to brand one protest, which was attacked by police with batons and tear gas. Lam had also lashed out at the demonstrators for "organising a riot." Riot is not simply a term of abuse. It has a legal meaning under colonial-era laws. Five protesters, who were arrested and charged with riot, could face prison terms of up to ten years.

Labelling protests as riots also could provide Beijing with a pretext to intervene directly in Hong Kong. The Basic Law agreed between Britain and China, as part of the 1997 handover, allows China to send its troops into the city during a state of emergency, including "turmoil" that "endangers national unity or security and is beyond the control of the [Hong Kong] government."

The threat of Chinese military intervention makes clear that mass protests, in themselves, are not enough. The struggle for democratic rights in Hong Kong is intimately connected to the fight for democracy throughout China. This, moreover, is completely bound up with the struggle for socialism by the working class, which alone is capable of ousting the Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing and its flunkies in Hong Kong, as part of the fight to overturn the capitalist system they both defend.



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