

Hundreds of thousands protest on the streets of Hong Kong

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More than half a million people took to Hong Kong's streets yesterday to demonstrate against the anti-democratic methods of the city's administration and to mark the anniversary of Britain's handover of its former colony to China on July 1, 1997.

Yesterday's march was the third mass protest against proposed legislation to allow extraditions from Hong Kong to the Chinese mainland. On June 16, an estimated 2 million people—over a quarter of the city's population—joined a protest and march despite Hong Kong's top official, Chief Executive Carrie Lam, announcing that discussion of the bill would be suspended indefinitely.

Yesterday's huge protest testifies to the widespread hostility to the Lam administration and fears that the legislation could be used to extradite political dissidents to China and to intimidate critics and opponents in Hong Kong itself. The protesters demanded the complete withdrawal of the legislation, Lam's resignation and the cancellation of charges against demonstrators in previous protests.

Hundreds of younger protesters forced their way into Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo) chamber on Monday evening, daubing graffiti on the walls and defacing pictures. Shortly after midnight, police used teargas to disperse demonstrators gathered outside, then stormed the building and ejected the remainder of the occupiers. Reportedly most protesters had left the LegCo chamber. The number of arrests and injuries is not known at this stage.

The youthful protesters had ignored pleas not to occupy the LegCo by conservative opposition politicians—the so-called pan-democrats who represent layers of Hong Kong's corporate and professional elites concerned that the extradition legislation threatens their interests. The pan-democrats have in the

past shown their willingness to compromise and do deals with the pro-Beijing administration and legislators who dominate the Legislative Council.

The umbrella grouping, the Civil Human Rights Front, which has called the mass protests, blamed Lam for failing to meet any of the demands. "She has not shown any sincerity to respond or to communicate so far," it said, adding that her refusal had "pushed youngsters towards desperation."

The protestors who broke into the LegCo building appear to be rather disparate in their motivations and lacking in a clear political perspective. One man wearing a gas mask who identified himself only as Henry, told the *Financial Times* that while some protesters might oppose the break-in, it was "a necessary evil." He continued: "One million of us marched peacefully, two million of us marched peacefully and yet the government didn't listen to us."

At one point a British colonial-era flag was displayed inside the LegCo chamber. Elsewhere, banners with "Free Hong Kong" were raised. However, neither the extolling of British colonial rule, or the promotion of Hong Kong parochialism offers the political means for fighting for democratic rights. Rather the struggle for democracy in Hong Kong is completely bound up with the fight for the democratic and social rights of the working class throughout China.

The fact that the mass protests have persisted despite the suspension of the extradition legislation points to the deeper issues motivating the marches and rallies. Hong Kong is one of the most socially unequal cities in the world, with immense social problems as a result of the lack of housing, welfare and other essential services.

Writing in the *South China Morning Post* last Friday, commentator Albert Cheng cautiously advised Beijing

and its Hong Kong administration that in order to end the protests it had to address the underlying social issues. “The government’s incompetence in tackling the city’s long-standing problems, such as the wealth gap and lack of upward mobility, has generated despair among the younger generation, prompting them to take to the streets,” he wrote.

The continuing protests are creating a political crisis, not just for the Lam administration but for Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in Beijing. The CCP leadership is afraid that the political unrest in Hong Kong will spill into the Chinese mainland despite its efforts to block out any news of the protests.

The upheaval compounds the mounting problems and dilemmas confronting the CCP bureaucracy, which faces Washington’s aggressive trade and economic war and continuing US military provocations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. The Chinese economy is continuing to slow, with growth rates well below the 8 percent benchmark that was long touted as necessary to avoid rising unemployment and social unrest.

Reflecting the deep-seated anxieties in Chinese ruling circles, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang warned the National People’s Congress in March: “There is still public dissatisfaction in many areas, such as education, healthcare, elderly care, housing, food and drug safety, and income distribution. Last year saw a number of public safety incidents and major workplace incidents.”

The CCP regime fears a political movement of the working class. It went to great lengths to black out any mention of the 30th anniversary of the June 4-5 Tiananmen Square massacre, which was aimed at crushing the mass opposition of Chinese workers to the consequences of the regime’s pro-market policies. Any mass movement of workers today would erupt on a far wider scale than in 1989.

The potential for the Hong Kong protests to trigger instability throughout China, and elsewhere, may account for the rather muted response in Western capitals. The European Union appealed for restraint and dialogue to defuse the protests, while Trump’s national security adviser, John Bolton, notorious for his militarist views, simply called on China “to adhere to its international obligations.”

Small protests in Hong Kong last week appealed to the US and European powers to raise the issue of the

extradition law at the G20 summit but were ignored. Those fighting for basic democratic rights in Hong Kong cannot rely on the imperialist powers, which exploit the issue of “human rights” only as a means for advancing their own strategic and economic interests.

What is required is a turn to the working class throughout China for a unified political struggle against the Stalinist CCP regime and for basic democratic and social rights on the basis of a genuine socialist perspective. That in turn must be rooted in an understanding of all of the crimes and betrayals of the CCP and Stalinism internationally during the 20th century.



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