

Gang members attack Hong Kong protesters

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Protesters in Hong Kong demonstrated again on Sunday, with 430,000 people taking part in a march through the city's Central and Western districts. Largely peaceful, the night however ended in violence in different parts of the city, including an attack at a train station by suspected organized crime members with links to the Hong Kong government.

That attack took place late Sunday at the Yuen Long train station located in the New Territories. Men believed to belong to China's so-called "triads," dressed in white—in contrast to the black worn by many protesters—wielded bats, metal poles and other weapons while beating protesters on a train returning from the day's rally, leaving 45 people hospitalized, including one in critical condition.

One witness stated, "They beat people in the carriage indiscriminately whoever they were, even people who were returning home from work... some men were shielding us. They didn't fight back, otherwise we would have been beaten even worse. They beat even women and children."

Police stood by and allowed the attack to take place, letting the suspected triad members leave the scene and then return a second time to continue their attack. Officers who spotted men in white near the train station claimed to see no weapons and did nothing to stop them, saying they could not be sure if they were involved.

"Is Hong Kong now allowing triads to do what they want, beating up people on the street with weapons?" said Democratic Party lawmaker Lam Cheuk-ting, who was among those hurt.

A video shows pro-Beijing lawmaker Junius Ho shaking hands with men in white and giving them a thumbs-up. Ho claimed in a press conference Monday he had nothing to do with the attack, but ludicrously suggested that the men "appeared to be normal residents, just like the protesters in your eyes." Ho

stated that the attackers were his friends and that "we can pardon the sinners."

The attack marks an escalation of violence by Hong Kong authorities. It would be entirely naïve, moreover, to conclude that this attack took place without the support of Beijing, which has grown increasingly fearful that the protest movement will spread to the mainland, where social discontent is also high. Hong Kong activists pointed to the fact that authorities in southern China are known to hire gang members to intimidate protesters or those with grievances.

Professor T Wing Lo, an expert in triad societies at City University of Hong Kong, stated, "Beijing officially claims some triad leaders are patriotic and help maintain social order in Hong Kong... the [Chinese Communist Party] tries to co-opt a lot of people, including triad leaders. The triad leaders get a lot of money from the CCP through middle men."

He continued, "If the CCP thinks they can't do something by themselves, they use the triads to do that."

Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam callously sought to cast blame on the protesters themselves for the attack. "Violence will only breed more violence, and at the end of the day the whole of Hong Kong and the people will suffer," she stated.

The attack is part of a stepped-up campaign to bring the protest movement under control. Unable to coerce the protesters to end their struggle by suspending the controversial extradition bill that initially touched off the demonstrations, the government is increasingly using violence, whether by police or hired thugs. Authorities are also attempting to intimidate protesters by reportedly using facial recognition software to track down 700 "core" demonstrators.

At the heart of the protest movement is not just the extradition bill, which opponents fear will be used to extradite political dissidents to the mainland. Protesters

are also demanding the right to directly elect their leaders, which was denied to Hong Kong by the previous British colonial rulers and now Beijing. Deep social inequality is also fuelling the sense of desperation many in Hong Kong feel, which is driving them into the streets.

Officially, 20 percent of the city lives below the poverty line, though this is set artificially low. For a single person, a monthly income over \$HK4,000 is enough to not be considered among the poor, but according to Oxfam in a study released last year, a worker would need at least \$HK10,494 to earn a living wage.

Unemployment is higher among youth between ages 20 and 24, officially standing at 7 percent, compared to 2.8 percent for the entire city. Yet many of those who are employed are hired through contracting agencies that take between 20 to 40 percent of a worker's wages. A person ostensibly earning \$HK13,000 in monthly wages could see that reduced to as little as \$HK8,000.

The basic issues are not simply Hong Kong questions, but questions posed before the international working class. The only progressive solution is through the unity of the entire Chinese working class against the exploitative conditions imposed by both the Stalinist regime in Beijing and Hong Kong's bourgeoisie, both of which are enriching themselves at the expense of workers. Workers around the world are combating similar forms of oppression, from the "yellow vests" in France to workers taking part in a mass strike in the US territory of Puerto Rico.

This unity is what Beijing fears the most. Last Thursday, the *South China Morning Post* reported that officials in Beijing were preparing short- and long-term plans for Hong Kong. The *Post* wrote, citing an anonymous official, "The immediate priority (for Beijing) was to develop a strategy to keep Hong Kong stable and prevent the unrest from spreading or affecting other important national policies and agendas."

Beijing seized on the clashes between police and protesters on Sunday as thousands separated from the main, approved protest march to demonstrate at the Beijing liaison office. Police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the protesters, who sprayed graffiti on the walls of the office building.

Beijing's state-owned Xinhua news agency wrote that the protests at the government offices "blatantly challenged the authority of the central government and touched the bottom line of the principle of 'one country, two systems,' which are absolutely intolerable."

Workers and youth must take this and the attack by thugs at the train station as a warning that Beijing is preparing to intervene with new and more violent methods to bring the protest movement under control.



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