

Beijing raises prospect of military intervention in Hong Kong

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With no sign of the massive protests in Hong Kong coming to an end, Beijing issued a veiled threat on Wednesday that it was preparing to use military force to put down the demonstrations. Fears are growing within the Stalinist regime that similar protests could spread throughout the Chinese mainland, given widespread social discontent.

Defense ministry spokesman Wu Qian stated at a briefing to introduce China's new defense white paper: "We are closely following the developments in Hong Kong, especially the violent attack against the central government liaison office by radicals on July 21." Wu added: "Some behavior of the radical protesters is challenging the authority of the central government and the bottom line of one country, two systems. This is intolerable."

Asked for additional information, Wu simply stated: "Article 14 of the Garrison Law has clear stipulations." This article specifies that the Hong Kong government can request the intervention of the Chinese military in maintaining order. The army garrison in Hong Kong is currently comprised of 6,000 soldiers in bases around the city. Any military intervention runs the risk of becoming another Tiananmen Square massacre.

"Challenging" the "bottom line of one country, two systems" is a red line for Beijing, which has expressed fear that "external forces" are responsible for the unrest in Hong Kong. The one country, two systems concept has been proposed for Taiwan as well, in order to facilitate the island's reunification with China. Any protest against this, or stoking of independence movements, is seen as a danger to China's security. Taiwan, for example, would become a base for United States military aggression against the mainland if it were to declare formal independence. For the same reason, Beijing fears allowing anti-China forces from

gaining a foothold in Hong Kong or other territories.

Beijing has altered its previous public stance that the army would not intervene in the Hong Kong protests. In making the shift, it seized upon isolated incidents of violence during last Sunday's protest rally. Beijing issued an initial veiled threat after protesters occupied the Hong Kong Legislative Council building on July 1. The following day, the *PLA Daily*, the army's main newspaper, reported on drills conducted by the garrison the previous week. That was an unusual move, because the PLA typically keeps a low profile in the city.

Beijing's ultimate fear is that similar demonstrations will spread throughout China and shake the capitalist foundations on which the Stalinist leadership rests. It has tied its sense of legitimacy, and justification for a lack of democratic rights, to a rapidly growing economy. However, this is wearing away as the economy slows.

Anger at deteriorating social conditions is now widespread, not just in Hong Kong and China, but throughout the international working class. Beijing looks around the world with fear that Chinese workers will follow the example of mass protests that have erupted in country after country, from the "yellow vests" in France, to Algeria and Sudan, and most recently, the huge demonstrations in Puerto Rico that forced Governor Ricardo Rosselló to resign from office yesterday.

Chinese state media gave widespread coverage to Sunday's violence in Hong Kong, in order to slander the protest movement as a whole and prepare public sentiment for a violent crackdown. Yet the protest march of some 430,000 people was largely peaceful. Only a few hundred participants broke off from that march to surround Beijing's liaison office, spray graffiti on its walls and hurl eggs. Police broke up the

gathering with tear gas and rubber bullets, itself an escalation of police violence.

In addition, organized gang members associated with China's triads, many of which are directly connected to the central government, launched a vicious attack on people returning from the day's rally, and others just going about their daily lives, at a train station in Yuen Long. The attackers were seen shaking hands with, and receiving thumbs-up from, pro-Beijing lawmaker Junius Ho, who later called them his "friends."

While the immediate impetus for the protests was a controversial extradition law, intensifying social inequality is driving the protests. Officially, 20 percent of the city lives in poverty, though many workers supposedly above the poverty line do not earn enough to make ends meet. "The needs of Hong Kong's youth have not been fulfilled," Derek Liu, a 21-year-old student, told the *Financial Times* this week. Liu pointed to the fact that youth lack access to housing and well-paying jobs, saying: "If you don't have them, you will find a way to change society."

A commentator on an online forum likewise wrote at the beginning of July: "Poor working conditions, no flat, no democracy—everything that appears ordinary in other countries is absent in Hong Kong."

Both the Hong Kong government and the pan-democrats have downplayed Beijing's threats to use the military against protesters. Replying to the Defense Ministry's threats Wednesday, Eric Chan, director of the Chief Executive's office, stated: "This is nothing new. The Hong Kong government has no plan to seek help from the [PLA Hong Kong] garrison in accordance with that provision [Article 14]."

Workers and youth need to take the threats from Beijing to use the military as a serious warning. They must reach out to workers throughout China and fight for the unity of the entire Chinese working class, while rejecting attempts from right-wing, parochial, and chauvinist tendencies to shift blame onto Chinese mainlanders for supposedly stealing the economic benefits of the city.

Declining living conditions in Hong Kong and throughout China and the growth of social inequality is the result of capitalism, which Beijing enforces to the hilt. It is only through an international movement in a fight for genuine socialism that the issues facing Hong Kongers, and workers and youth throughout China and

Asia, can be addressed.



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