

# General strike signals entry of working class into Hong Kong protests

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The general strike by Hong Kong workers on Monday signals a new stage in the mounting mass protest movement triggered by the government's extradition law. Tens of thousands of workers from diverse industries—including rail, airport, civil service, engineering, construction, finance and banking—joined the protests disrupting the city's transport system and limiting operations at the city's international airport.

The strike was not organised by the trade unions but, like the protests themselves, took place as a result of the initiatives of workers. The Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU), which is aligned with the official opposition in the city's Legislative Council—the pan-democrat grouping—nominally backed the strike, but did not call out the members of its affiliated unions numbering nearly 200,000.

The entry of the working class into the protests points to the underlying social and economic driving forces. The demands of the protest leaders have to date been limited to the complete withdrawal of the extradition law, the resignation of Chief Executive Carrie Lam, the withdrawal of charges against protesters, an independent inquiry into police violence and free and open elections based on universal suffrage.

The working class, however, confronts not only the lack of basic democratic rights but a worsening economic and social crisis. While Hong Kong's billionaires, many of whom have close connections to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing, dominate economic life, the majority of people struggle to survive in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Some 20 percent of the population live below the poverty line in cramped, substandard accommodation and receive little support from Hong Kong's very limited welfare services.

The mass protests in Hong Kong, which have

continued for more than two months and at times have encompassed over a quarter of the city's population, are part of the resurgence of the working class internationally, driven by the deepening crisis of global capitalism. The popular upsurge of opposition takes place alongside protracted mass demonstrations in the US territory of Puerto Rico, huge strikes in India and the "yellow vest" movement in France, to name just a few.

The protests in Hong Kong are a harbinger of an upsurge of the working class throughout the region, including in China itself. Just over the border, tens of millions of industrial workers labour in highly exploitative conditions in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone and neighbouring cities. Beijing's push for legislation to allow extradition from Hong Kong to mainland China is motivated by concerns that the city is a haven for dissidents and critics who could trigger political opposition in China.

The CCP's thinly veiled threats to use the military to suppress the Hong Kong protests are driven by the fear that the strikes and demonstrations could encourage workers in other parts of China to fight for their social and democratic rights. Despite heavy police-state repression and censorship, there are signs of increased industrial action by Chinese workers, with the number of strikes recorded by the Hong Kong-based China Labour Bulletin increasing from 1,250 in 2017 to more than 1,700 in 2018—a small fraction of the total.

No-one can doubt the courage and determination of Hong Kong protestors to fight for their basic democratic rights. Moreover, many protesters are dismissive of the pan-democrats, who represent layers of the Hong Kong corporate elite concerned at the encroachment of Beijing on their interests. What is lacking, however, is a clear political alternative on

which to conduct a struggle, not only against the Hong Kong administration headed by Carrie Lam, but against the CCP regime in Beijing.

The following fundamental principles must underpin the political perspective fought for by the working class.

Firstly, it must be based on internationalism and the rejection of all forms of nationalism, including the parochial outlook of Hong Kong separatist groups who blame Chinese mainlanders for deteriorating social and economic conditions in the city. Only through a unified struggle of workers throughout China is it possible to wage a struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing and its political flunkies in Hong Kong, as part of a broader international movement against capitalism.

Secondly, the working class has to establish its political independence from all factions of the ruling class. Those layers of the corporate elite that support the call for greater democratic rights and autonomy for Hong Kong only do so to boost their own position and profits from the exploitation of the working class. Moreover, workers should reject those who appeal to American and British imperialism to intervene on behalf of democracy in Hong Kong.

The US and its allies have no concern about democratic rights in Hong Kong or anywhere else. They have repeatedly exploited the banner of “human rights” as the pretext for confrontation and war. The Trump administration is now recklessly accelerating its economic war and military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific against China. Any US support for the protest movement in Hong Kong would simply be a ploy to put greater pressure on Beijing.

Thirdly, the fight for the democratic rights of the working class is completely bound up with the struggle for socialism and fundamental social rights to a decent job, health care and education, and affordable housing. The lack of political leadership in the working class in Hong Kong and China is a product, above all, of the false identification of Maoism and Stalinism with genuine Marxism and socialism.

The building of revolutionary leadership in the Chinese working class requires the clarification of the key strategic experiences of the 20th century and the betrayals of Stalinism, including in China. The reactionary nationalist perspective of “socialism in one country” that guided Mao and the CCP leadership

produced one disaster after another, opening the door to capitalist restoration from 1978 onwards. If British imperialism was willing to hand its colony of Hong Kong back to China in 1997, it was not on the basis of “one country, two systems” but rather that there was just one system—capitalism—throughout China.

The necessary historic lessons derive from the struggle of the world Trotskyist movement—represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)—against Stalinism over nearly a century. We urge workers and youth in Hong Kong looking for a political way forward to contact us and begin a political dialogue over these essential issues.



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