

Hong Kong protests met with denunciations and threats

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For a second day, protesters occupying Hong Kong's international airport have halted hundreds of departures, prompting further threats from Beijing, condemnations from Hong Kong officials and calls by the city's corporate chiefs for order to be restored.

The political stand-off in Hong Kong that began with mass protests in early June has now become a significant contributing factor to global financial and economic instability. The city has functioned as a key entry point and base of operations for foreign investors and corporations conducting business in China. As a result, Hong Kong's airport is one of the busiest in the world both for passengers and freight.

Yesterday, amid an occupation numbering in the thousands, the airport authority was compelled to halt all check-in services for flights after 4.30 p.m., resulting in the cancellation of some 300 departures. Clashes erupted between riot police in the evening after protesters seized a mainland Chinese man who they accused of being an undercover police officer.

According to the *South China Morning Post*, the riot police used pepper spray in the airport to drive out protesters. It reported that as of this morning only a small group of some 30 protesters remained.

The airport occupation has dramatically raised the stakes in the political confrontation that is now in its 10th week. The huge protests in June over planned legislation to allow extradition from Hong Kong to China have morphed into a protest movement making wider democratic demands, including action against police violence and free elections based on universal suffrage.

The city's administration, led by Chief Executive Carrie Lam and backed by Beijing, has adamantly refused to make any concessions to the protesters, other than to suspend the legislation. At a press conference

yesterday, Lam denounced the "illegal activities" of the protesters, defended the violent actions of the police and warned that "riot activities [have] pushed Hong Kong to the brink of no return."

Lam's remarks echoed those of Hong Kong business leaders amid falling share prices and fears of an economic downturn, especially in the property sector. Swire Pacific, a wealthy family-owned business empire that owns the Cathay Pacific airline and an extensive property portfolio, issued a statement condemning "illegal activities and violent behaviour" and gave Lam and the police full support "in their efforts to restore law and order." Sun Hung Kai Properties, controlled by Asia's third richest family, also called on Tuesday for the restoration of social order and backed Lam.

Sections of the Hong Kong business elite, concerned at Beijing's encroachment on their interests, had initially supported the protests against the extradition bill but are now calling for an end to the protest movement. Property tycoon Peter Woo said in a statement on Monday that the protests had already forced the government to shelve the legislation and claimed that some people were using the issue to "purposely stir up trouble."

The protesters, however, are insisting that the extradition bill be completely withdrawn, not simply suspended. Moreover, underlying the protracted protests are more fundamental concerns about the lack of basic democratic rights in Hong Kong and the social crisis facing workers and youth in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The huge social gulf between the handful of billionaires who dominate Hong Kong, economically and politically, and the vast majority of the city's population looms large. Low wages, economic insecurity, the lack of opportunities for young people,

unaffordable housing, and threadbare welfare services are all fuelling discontent and anger.

As *Financial Times* commentator Jamil Anderlini noted this week: “Today, the biggest fortunes in Hong Kong rely on control of land and property in what is the most expensive real estate market in the world. The average monthly salary in Hong Kong is around \$HK17,500 (\$US2,230), while the average rent for a one-bedroom flat in the city centre is \$HK16,500.”

The entry of the working class into the protest movement, marked by the calling of a general strike involving tens of thousands last week, is provoking fear in the ruling classes not only in Hong Kong and Beijing but internationally. The very muted response to the threats of Chinese intervention to suppress the protests reflects concern in ruling circles that events in Hong Kong could be replicated in cities around the world.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime has ramped up its denunciations of protesters. In comments on Monday, a spokesman for the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office branded the protesters as “deranged” and declared that “the first signs of terrorism” were appearing, laying the basis for Chinese military intervention.

The *South China Morning Post* reported that a convoy of trucks carrying heavily armed police had arrived on Monday in Shenzhen, a major Chinese city and special economic zone just over the border with Hong Kong. While a Beijing-based military expert told the newspaper that the movements were part of regular exercises and no cause for concern, the state-owned Chinese newspapers, the *People’s Daily* and *Global Times*, posted videos of the convoy and warned Hong Kong protesters that they could face dire consequences.

The *People’s Daily* posted a statement on social media saying the People’s Armed Police are in Shenzhen prepared to handle “riots, disturbance, major violence and crime and terrorism-related social security issues.” In a social media post in Chinese on Tuesday, the *Global Times* stated that “if Hong Kong rioters cannot read the signal of having armed police gathering in Shenzhen, then they are asking for self-destruction,” according to a CNBC translation.

These comments are also directed at poisoning public opinion on the Chinese mainland, reflecting deep fears in Beijing that the protests in Hong Kong will provoke social unrest among Chinese workers over the lack of

democratic rights and deteriorating social conditions.

The state-owned Chinese media has also accused the United States of being the “black hand” behind the Hong Kong protests and attempting to foment a “colour revolution” on China’s doorstep. Undoubtedly US officials are watching events in Hong Kong closely and calculating whether they can be used to further American interests.

However, even though the Trump administration has made strident and provocative denunciations of Beijing over trade and dangerous strategic flashpoints such as the South China Sea, it has made no such comments over the Hong Kong protests.

In a tweet yesterday, Trump declared that Chinese troops were being moved towards Hong Kong, but far from opposing the decision he appeared to welcome it. “Our Intelligence has informed us that the Chinese Government is moving troops to the Border with Hong Kong. Everyone should be calm and safe!” he commented.

In remarks to the media earlier in the day, Trump virtually sympathised with Chinese and Hong Kong authorities, saying: “The Hong Kong thing is a very tough situation—very tough. We’ll see what happens.” He then added: “I hope it works out for everybody, including China. I hope it works out peacefully. I hope nobody gets hurt. I hope nobody gets killed.”

Trump’s comments only underscore the basic class unity between the ruling classes in the US, China and around the world against the resurgence of working-class struggle internationally, of which the protests in Hong Kong are one initial expression.



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