Hong Kong protests continue into twelfth week

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26 August 2019

The protest movement in Hong Kong has entered its 12th week with demonstrations and rallies over the weekend to highlight the continuing demands for democratic reforms and an end to police violence. Clashes with police took place involving for the first time the use of water cannon as police attempted to disperse protesters.

On Saturday, tens of thousands of protesters rallied in the Kwun Tong area to urge the Hong Kong administration to respond to their demands: the complete withdrawal of legislation allowing extradition to mainland China, the resignation of Chief Executive Carrie Lam, an independent inquiry into police violence, and the withdrawal of all charges against protesters.

The protesters also opposed the government's installation of "smart" environmental monitoring lamp-posts which they say could be used to spy on residents. One of the lamp-posts was torn down. Clashes erupted between police who alleged that projectiles and petrol bombs had been thrown, and attacked the protest with tear gas and batons. Some 29 people were arrested.

Yesterday thousands of protesters marched from Kwai Chung to Tseun Wan district in the New Territories resulting in further clashes. Police used two water cannons as well as tear gas to try to break up the demonstration. As tensions escalated, police drew their guns. One, who claimed he was physically threatened, fired a live round into the air.

The largest demonstration took place on Friday evening. Organisers estimated that 210,000 people took part in forming a human chain across the city dubbed "the Hong Kong Way"—a reference to a similar demonstration that took place in the Baltic States 30 years ago. Dubbed "the Baltic Way," more than a million people linked hands in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on August 23 1989 in opposition to the Soviet Stalinist regime and to press for independence.

The Hong Kong protest also voiced separatist sentiments with some of the participants chanting "Free Hong Kong!" and "Recover Hong Kong, revolution of the times!" As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the way forward in the struggle for democratic and social rights is not the establishment of a separate capitalist entrepot, but rather a joint struggle of the working class throughout China against the Beijing regime and Chinese capitalism.

"The Baltic Way" was part of the far broader movement against Stalinism in 1989 that ended with the collapse of the regimes in Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism. The outcome for working people was a massive social and cultural regression, which could only have been prevented by the working class in a unified political fight against Stalinism for genuine socialism.

After 12 weeks of mass protests, the Hong Kong administration is under considerable pressure. Chief Executive Lam held a meeting yesterday with key powerbrokers and politicians in a bid to find a means for defusing and ending the protest movement. Those present included her cabinet members as well as establishment figures such as former chief executive Henry Tang Ying-yen and former vice-chancellor of Chinese University, Joseph Sung Jao-yiu.

According to the *South China Morning Post*, some of those present urged Lam to make concessions on some demands: to formally withdraw the extradition legislation, which has only been suspended, and to convene some form of public inquiry, including into police conduct. Lam reportedly did not flatly rule out the suggestions, but "hedged about timing, tone and

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tactics." She has suggested a long-term dialogue, including with protest leaders, but has provided no details.

Lam is also under pressure to end the protests from Beijing which has threatened to intervene to suppress the movement. As well as mobilising armed paramilitary police in neighbouring Shenzhen, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime is putting pressure on businesses in Hong Kong to take disciplinary action against employees involved in the protests.

Hong Kong's airline, Cathay Pacific, in which state-owned Chinese corporations hold a significant stake, issued an email on August 12 warning of "disciplinary consequences for employees who support or participate in illegal protests." Beijing threatened to cut off access to Chinese airspace if action was not taken. At least two pilots, two ground staff and a cabin crew union leader have been sacked, and the company's CEO removed.

Despite warnings, an estimated 5,000 people took part last Friday in an accounting-industry protest in the city's business district to voice their support for the protest demands. State-owned media in China previously criticized the major accounting firms—KPMG, Deloitte, PwC and Ernst & Young—after some of their employees took out a newspaper advertisement critical of their companies for failing to take a stand for democracy.

The protests which began in early June have had a significant impact on Hong Kong's economy. The *Wall Street Journal* reported: "Hong Kong's stock market has lost nearly $300 billion in market value since the end of June. The cumulative damage to spending and investment is threatening to tip the city's $363 billion economy—roughly the size of Israel's—into recession. Analysts at Morgan Stanley expect Hong Kong's economic growth for the quarter ending in September will be the worst in a decade."

Underlying the protracted protests are social concerns over job opportunities and high prices, particularly for accommodation, that find no voice in the demands of the official protest organisers. Median property prices in one of the world's most expensive cities reached 20.9 times median household income in 2018, compared to 12.6 times for Vancouver and 11.7 times for Sydney—two other costly cities.

A professor at Johns Hopkins University, Ho-Fung Hung, told *Bloomberg* last week that the economic malaise, combined with frustration at the lack of a political voice and perceived loss of cultural identity, was driving young people to protest. "Participants come from all economic backgrounds," he said. "What binds them together is a shared sense that there is no future for them in Hong Kong. Compared with their parents they will live a lower quality of life."

The sense of alienation extends to the official political opposition in Hong Kong—the so-called pan-democrat grouping in the Legislative Assembly—that has repeatedly compromised with the pro-Beijing administration. What is needed, however, is more than a diffuse sense of resentment and anger, but rather a socialist and internationalist program based on the working class throughout China to oppose the CCP regime and its political servants in Hong Kong.

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