Tens of thousands join first day of Hong Kong protest strike

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An estimated 40,000 workers and their supporters took part in a rally at Tamar Park in Hong Kong yesterday during the first day of a two-day strike in support of the demands of the anti-government protest movement that began in June.

The strike coincided with a boycott of the first day of classes by university and high school students. Some 4,000 secondary students from some 230 schools joined a demonstration at Edinburgh Place in Hong Kong, before an estimated 30,000 from 11 tertiary institutions turned up at the city's Chinese University for a mass rally.

Appearing at the rally of striking workers, Carol Ng, head of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), said that workers from 29 sectors across Hong Kong had taken part but gave no overall figure. The HKCTU, which has links to the establishment opposition known as the pan-democrats, did not call the strike, leaving it up to individuals to take time off, call in sick or not appear for work.

Ng noted that the stoppage was smaller than the first general strike on August 5 which involved an estimated 350,000 people, with 290,000 participating in seven rallies across the city. That strike paralysed much of the city's transport system including the rail system and the airport where more than 150 flights were cancelled.

Ng said that the lower turnout was partly due to growing fears by workers of dismissal. More than 20 workers in the aviation sector have lost their jobs over their involvement in the protest movement. She declared that striking workers and protesters faced "white terror" from the police but added that the rally sent a message to authorities that "Hongkongers do not want to give up."

Beijing has put pressure on companies to take disciplinary action against employees taking part in the protests. The Hong Kong-based airline Cathay Pacific in particular shifted from allowing its workers to join the protests to threatening them with dismissal if they stopped work or took part in the anti-government demonstrations.

The HKCTU, however, by failing to call strike action and leaving it up to individuals to stop work, has left workers vulnerable to punitive action by employers. In response to the Cathay Pacific dismissals, it organised only a token rally last week near the headquarters of the Swire Group, the company's largest shareholder, to demand the reinstatement of employees.

The union confederation is doing all it can to limit action by workers to the demands of protest leaders: the withdrawal of the legislation allowing extradition to China, the resignation of Chief Executive Carrie Lam, an independent investigation into police violence, the withdrawal of all charges against protesters and free elections based on universal suffrage.

Underpinning the protest movement, however, are not only concerns about democratic rights, but also the worsening social crisis facing workers in one of the most expensive cities in the world. The HKCTU is not raising social issues such as poor pay and conditions, unaffordable housing and the lack of welfare services as it fears the development of an anti-capitalist movement.

The union confederation also promotes the Hong Kong parochialism and rejects any turn to the working class throughout China, which also confronts attacks on its democratic and social rights by the Chinese Communist Party regime in Beijing.

The HKCTU's political outlook was on display at yesterday's rally when it invited two lawmakers to speak. Claudia Mo is convenor of the pan-democrats, which represents layers of the Hong Kong corporate

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elite that are concerned that Beijing's intrusion will impact on their economic interests but are hostile to any movement of the working class. Sixtus Baggio, who was a leader in the 2014 protest movement demanding universal suffrage, is an advocate of Hong Kong separatism.

The fact that tens of thousands of workers did not turn up for work and risked dismissal reflects their deep concern over inroads into democratic and social rights.

Maggie Chung, an accountant, told the *Straits Times* that she took sick leave to join the strike and had been involved in assisting protesters since June. "I'm actually very afraid but someone has to go out there to press the government so I will join for as long as I can," she said.

Yuen Hin, 25, a tutor who took the day off work, spoke to *South China Morning Post*, and said he had been going to most of the protests and felt the local government no longer had the power to end the crisis under Beijing's control.

In one indication of broader action by workers, Reuters reported that at the Queen Mary Hospital hundreds of staff formed a human chain in the corridors and held up placards to demonstrate their support for the strike and the demands of protesters.

The stoppages also took place despite further menacing warnings from the government and from Beijing.

Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung, the second most senior official in Hong Kong, told journalists yesterday that the administration was considering the use of the territory's Emergency Regulations Ordinance. This draconian colonial-era legislation allows the chief executive to "make any regulations whatsoever which he may consider desirable in the public interest."

In other words, Carrie Lam, who as chief executive occupies a role akin to the British colonial governor, has the power to declare a state of emergency, which would give her virtually unlimited scope to impose police state measures.

Seizing on the weekend's protests in which demonstrators blocked transport to the airport and blockaded rail stations, the Hong Kong administration followed the lead from Beijing and described the protests as showing signs of terrorism. Secretary for security John Lee ominously declared: "The extent of violence, danger and destruction have reached very serious conditions… Radical people have escalated their violent and illegal acts, showing elements of terror."

In reality, the violent clashes have chiefly been the responsibility of police, including undercover officers and riot police, who have used batons, tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, water cannon and the firing of live rounds as warning shots to intimidate and suppress protesters. By deliberately using the term "terrorism," the government is providing a pretext for declaring a state of emergency.

At the same time, the Beijing regime is threatening to intervene militarily and has mounted exercises involving heavily-armed paramilitary police in the city of Shenzhen adjacent to Hong Kong. China's state-owned Xinhua news agency issued an English-language editorial on Sunday night warning that "the end is coming for those attempting to disrupt Hong Kong and antagonise China."

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