

Hong Kong administration seeks to split protest movement

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In a calculated bid to split the Hong Kong protest movement, Chief Executive Carrie Lam yesterday announced that her administration intended to completely withdraw the extradition bill that triggered the mass protests more than three months ago. Lam, however, refused to make any concessions on other demands, provoking anger among protesters and criticism by protest leaders, who told the media that it was “too little, too late.”

The legislation, which would have allowed extradition to the Chinese mainland, provoked huge rallies in June of up to two million people. Ongoing protests were fueled by widespread concern over the lack of democratic rights, as well as the territory’s worsening social crisis. The movement continued to gain momentum despite Lam’s declaration in June that discussion on the legislation in the Legislative Council had been suspended.

The Lam administration unleashed the police, including undercover police and riot officers, in vicious attacks on protesters, in an escalating reign of violence. This has included the use of batons, tear gas, pepper spray, water cannon, rubber bullets and, in recent weeks, the firing of live rounds as warning shots.

In the neighbouring city of Shenzhen, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime has made a public show of force involving heavily-armed paramilitary police. It has threatened to intervene in Hong Kong, which in the 1997 handover deal with Britain has a degree of autonomy.

As the protests escalated, the demands voiced by the leaders of the Civil Human Rights Front broadened to include the resignation of Lam, an independent inquiry into police violence, the dropping of all charges against arrested protesters, and free elections based on universal suffrage.

Lam’s concession on extraditions, following months of adamant refusal, is motivated firstly by the deteriorating Hong Kong economy, and secondly, by the intervention of the working class over recent weeks in the first major strikes in decades.

The territory is on the verge of recession amid the mass protests and the US-China trade war. A business survey released yesterday reported “the steepest decline in the health of the private sector since February 2009” in the midst of the global financial crisis. The IHS Markit Hong Kong purchasing managers’ index (PMI), fell to 40.8 in August from 43.8 in July—a figure below 50 indicates contraction. The Hong Kong share market responded to Lam’s statement with an upward bounce of nearly 4 percent.

Lam’s announcement followed a two-day strike involving tens of thousands of workers, who ignored threats of disciplinary action to take part in protest rallies on Monday and Tuesday. The strike action, which was not called by the trade unions, reflects deeper underlying social concerns over staggering levels of inequality, poor wages and conditions, unaffordable housing and the lack of welfare services. Thousands of university and secondary students also boycotted the first day of the new academic year to show their support for the protest movement.

While Lam indicated that she would be open to dialogue, she has ruled out resigning, dropping charges against protesters or granting universal suffrage. As far as police violence was concerned, Lam indicated that such matters would be dealt with by the so-called Independent Police Complaints Council—a body with limited power appointed by the chief executive herself.

Lam is seeking to gain the support of the more conservative leaders of the protests in a bid to divide the movement and pave the way for the suppression of

more militant and determined layers.

Well aware of the difficulty of reining in the politically heterogeneous protest movement, the Civil Human Rights Front has responded cautiously. The Front has representatives of a collection of NGOs, as well as political parties and groups associated with the official opposition in the Legislative Council—the so-called pan-democrat grouping.

In comments to CBS News yesterday, Civil Human Rights Front co-convenor Bonnie Leung welcomed the withdrawal of the extradition legislation, saying: “I’m glad it’s finally done, but it’s not sufficient.” While still reiterating the Front’s five demands, including Lam’s resignation, she left open the door to negotiations: “If an olive branch is given [by the government] then we will discuss openly with them.”

The Civil Human Rights Front and the pan-democrats would like to reach an accommodation with the Lam administration. They represent layers of the Hong Kong ruling elite concerned about the impact of Beijing’s encroachment on their interests, but hostile to any independent movement of the working class that threatens their profits and businesses. However, they are wary that if they compromise too openly with Lam and Beijing, they will lose any political credibility.

Pan-democrat lawmaker Claudia Mo declared yesterday: “It’s not a matter whether the Democrats at the legislature or the pan-democratic camp accept ... It’s up to the young protesters. We need all five demands. The damage is done. She [Lam] should have used the word ‘withdraw’ and it would have appeased society, now it is too late.”

The various young leaders who emerged during the so-called Umbrella movement in 2014 for universal suffrage, reflect the widespread distrust among youth in the official opposition and advocate more militant tactics. However, their political outlook is not fundamentally different from the pan-democrats. They advocate for greater democratic rights within a parliamentary framework but have little or nothing to say about the social crisis facing workers and youth.

Demosisto Party leader Joshua Wong, who has been prominently promoted in the US and international media as the face of the 2014 protests, issued a statement on Twitter yesterday declaring Lam’s announcement was “too little and too late.” Like the Civil Human Rights Front, he called for all five

demands to be addressed.

Among broader layers, there is a determination to continue the protests. A construction worker, who gave his surname as Chow, told the *Guardian*: “Of course I don’t accept this. Why didn’t she do this three months ago? None of this would have happened. Now, so many people have been arrested and so many have been beaten over their heads.”

Another protester interviewed by the newspaper said he had faced off with the police in many violent conflicts over recent weeks. He insisted that he would continue to demonstrate because he was outraged that the police were not being held accountable for the use of excessive force.

What is lacking, however, is a political perspective in opposition not only to the Lam administration and the CCP regime in Beijing, but also to the bourgeois pan-democrat opposition in Hong Kong and its various political satellites. Only a unified struggle of the working class in Hong Kong and throughout China will be able to conduct a consistent struggle for basic democratic and social rights, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

In doing so, it is necessary to oppose all forms of nationalism and chauvinism, including that promoted by right-wing groups such as Civic Passion and Hong Kong Indigenous that try to scapegoat “mainlanders” for the social crisis in Hong Kong.

It is also imperative to reject the right-wing bourgeois layers who are appealing for intervention by the major imperialist powers, particularly the US and Britain, which have a long criminal record in manipulating human rights for their own interests. Above all, it is necessary to clarify the role of Stalinism and Maoism, which was always based on a rejection of socialist internationalism and paved the way for capitalist restoration in China and the deepening exploitation of the working class.



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